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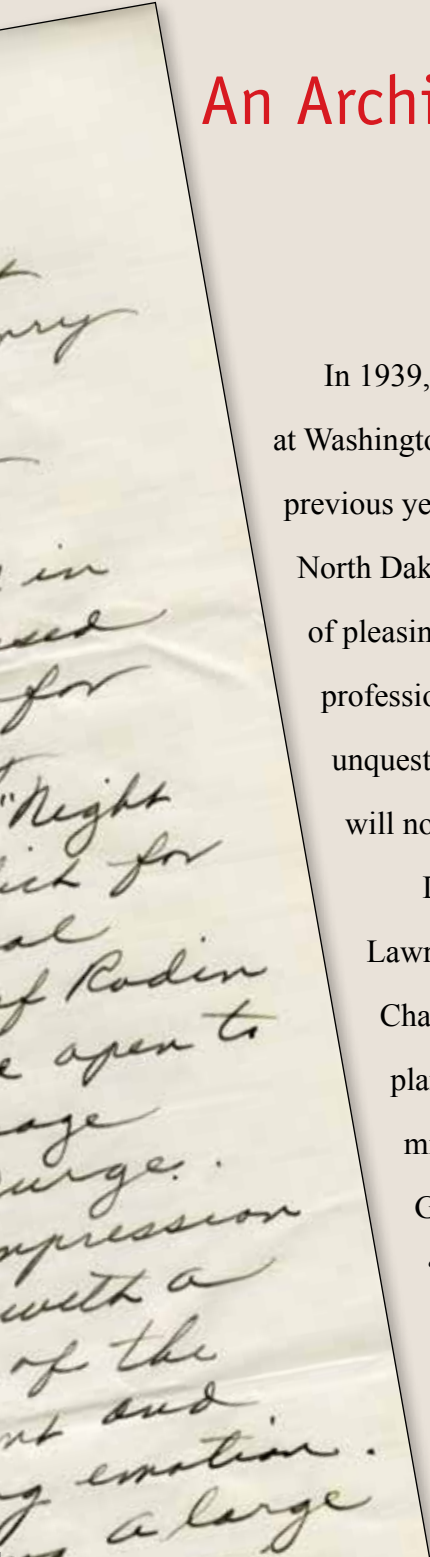
# out all right”:

## An Architect’s Adventures in 1939-40 Europe

BY MIRANDA RECHTENWALD

In 1939, Victor Gilbertson won the prestigious Steedmen Fellowship in Architecture at Washington University, granting him \$1,500 to study abroad. Having placed second the previous year, by June 1939 this young, accomplished, and determined architect from North Dakota was more than ready to study the great churches of Europe. “A young man of pleasing personality and marked ability,” the Steedmen Committee noted, “whose professional experiences in addition to his background of scholarship qualify him unquestionably to profit by a year of travel. . . . Let us hope that the threatened conflict will not break forth to interrupt his studies.”

Despite repeated urgings to return home by the fellowship advisor, Professor Lawrence Hill of Washington University in St. Louis, Gilbertson forged ahead. Changing itineraries often and taking advantage of whatever boat, train, or plane he could catch, Gilbertson was somehow able to avoid arrest, injury, or misfortune. Reprinted here are selections from the extensive correspondence of Gilbertson and Hill, offering a unique view of Europe and North Africa as the “threatened conflict”—soon called World War II—unfolded.



July 18, 1939

Dear Professor Hill,

To my great surprise and amazement I have now completed a month of travel in England. What you told me about time going quickly, is if anything, an understatement. . . . To say that it has been a perfect month would be an exaggeration too I suppose, but I do believe that it would apply to everything but English coffee and some of the food. But since I'm not living by bread alone (the English seem to think so with meals about 90% starch) I'll get on to the meat of my journey.

First off, I had an enjoyable trip home, a quick look at the great New York Fair and an ocean voyage that left little to be desired. From what I saw and heard of the rest of the boat, I'm more than satisfied with third class passage. We had a group that was a cross section of American and French people with enough English, German, Hungarians, etc. to give it an international atmosphere. . . .

The trip along the Cornwall Coast was a never to be forgotten sight. The deep blue-green water, white clouds, and rocky coast made a wonderful picture. I disembarked at Plymouth [England] on the 20<sup>th</sup> [of June, 1939] . . .

The sun shone in Bath for a few minutes while we visited the Roman baths so we drank in ancient history along with the of the water and departed for London, where we didn't mind for a few days whether it rained or not.

There was a thrill a minute at least! I don't think I missed many things: Kew Gardens; Houses of Parliament; British Museum; Fair Galleries; Wallace Collection; Westminster Abbey and Cathedral; the zoo; the ballet; St. Paul's; Wimbledon— . . . there was a wonderful neighborly feeling amongst the peoples there. . . . I visited Canterbury, Peterborough, Lincoln, York and Durham Cathedrals all in four days. It's too much to jamb into so short a time but I hope before long to learn how to hold myself in . . .

I sail tonight for Bergen Norway, from which I leave by train for Oslo. I intend to leave Oslo July 27 and go on to Stockholm to remain until August 8<sup>th</sup>. From there I go to Copenhagen and Hamburg and arrive in Berlin August 15<sup>th</sup> or sooner if possible. On about the 22<sup>nd</sup> I begin a tour again that will take me to Cologne, Amsterdam, Hilversum, etc. . . .

The experts seem to agree that if the Danzig\* fireworks starts, it will happen about August 15<sup>th</sup>. If this is true I will have a ringside seat in Berlin. However, I'm quite confident that nothing will happen and that I will continue to have the same kind of architectural picnic that England has given me.

Sincerely Yours,  
Victor Gilbertson

[editor note: \*semi-autonomous city-state between Poland and Germany]



Gilbertson drew sketches in the margins of his letters, but also preserved them in more than 80 drawings such as this one from England. (Image: Rolf Gilbertson)

Berlin, Germany  
August 20, 1939.

Dear Professor Hill,

I saw Scandinavia in a blaze of glorious sunshine. Quite a welcome contrast to the inevitable murk of [the] English climate. In fact I found most everything in the North very grand except the little problem of language. . . . I tried to use my very elementary knowledge of Norse on the natives and they invariably came back at me in English! Even a service station attendant in an out of the way place, to whom I addressed a question in Norwegian, looked at me and said "speak English better maybe?" . . .

Incidentally, for some really grand scenery to be had on a limited budget of time and money while in Norway, I can highly recommend the trip from Bergen to Oslo by train—its gorgeous. Instead of seeking passes as do most



Among the churches Gilbertson visited was the Cologne Cathedral—which was the purpose of his trip. Even though a simmering world war seemed to be interrupting all plans, he seemed largely undisturbed by it. (Image: Washington University in St. Louis Archives)

mountain railways, the Norwegian trains go over the top. From sea level to 1200 meters up amongst the glaciers and back down to sea level again is accomplished in a 12 hour trip.

My first real glimpse of Germany was Lubeck where from the train I glimpsed a modern church, the open tower of which revealed bells of various sizes. A grand sight from a distance. . . . I got back on the train and headed for Hamburg. . . .

Berlin really, really is doing things—architecturally and in a city planning nature. A far reaching plan is being carried out to establish 25 mile long East–West and North–South axis [roads]. Plans are being carried out in the widening of various other streets and clearances of considerable portions.

The Third Reich and its military nature is adequately represented in architectural achievements and what is more, these buildings reflect exactly the nature of the present regime. The best to date are the Olympic buildings.

Truly a fine sports park. In a similar vein are the Exhibition buildings, Duetches Hall and many government buildings.

. . . Intend to spend a few more days in Berlin and then continue on to Cologne, and then Amsterdam, . . . The Hague, Brussels and Paris. I plan on a month in Paris now and I'm considering a return there next spring in place of trying to see Turkey. I find that my schoolmate who is on an archaeological expedition in Istanbul is to leave . . . and will not return until April 1 or later. . . . It would now prove more expensive and I would certainly see less than if I had my friend there to give me the benefit of his knowledge

I will know exactly and will tell you in my next letter what my plans will be from Paris on.

Sincerely Yours,  
Victor C. Gilbertson

Amsterdam  
September 4, 1939

Dear Professor Hill:

I am temporarily stranded in Holland while history is speedily ground out! At least I hope my position is temporary! I am quite thankful tho, that I am here rather than in France or Germany. I came from Cologne on the last train—a miraculous piece of luck.

I'm in the company of two other Americans. I've spend the last few days making the rounds of shipping companies and travel agencies. Travel however is practically at a standstill or fully booked far ahead. If the safety of the seas for neutral boats becomes reasonably sure again I have considered going to Greece or if not that, a return to Sweden seems like a good idea. There are a few worthwhile trips in Scandinavia that I can do—Finland alone would furnish considerable of architectural interest.

For a week or two, tho [*sic*] I shall sit right here in Holland I guess, and enjoy brick architecture. . . . Then too I can always hope that the war will suddenly cease and I can continue my travels. I don't of course believe that will happen but the hope serves to bolster my resistance to buying a ticket home on the next boat.

You can rest assured that I won't make any move until all the possibilities have been investigated.  
Sincerely yours,  
Victor C. Gilbertson

[post script] Sept 8.

It is possible that I can get a visa for travel in France within two weeks. If I can get a French visa I can get one for Belgium. The Italian border is open, Italy is neutral and to date no visa is required so it looks like I'll be on my way again.

My enthusiasm for travelling is rapidly returning—if they just keep this war in Poland, I'm all set.  
Gilbertson



Although he was in Europe to observe and draw churches, Gilbertson was also taken by this windmill in Utrecht that summer. (Image: Rolf Gilbertson)

Amsterdam, Sept 15. [1939]

Dear Professor Hill,

Until today, the only remaining traveling open to me was to get a bicycle and cover the remaining square feet of Holland. I can't go to Germany, France, or Belgium. That precludes the possibility of going anywhere. . . . I could do worse than tour rural Holland but I thirst to see the remaining parts of Europe open to tourists before they all become embroiled in war.

Out of a clear sky a Dutch boat decided to sail for Greece and I'm jumping at the chance. My address for the immediate future will be: American Express Co—Athens.

I will send my future itinerary and the account of my travel in Germany and Holland as soon as I reach Greece.

These times are very trying and up until now, very discouraging but in another sense, the situation is certainly interesting. Most everything may yet turn out all right.

Sincerely yours,  
Victor Gilbertson

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Sept. 7, 1939  
[from St. Louis]

My dear Gilbertson:

Thank you for your two interesting reports on your travels to date and your cablegram announcing their sudden interruption.

I am sending this in care of the American Express Company in Amsterdam by Air Mail trusting that it will reach you and dispel any hesitation you may entertain about coming home.

A speedy return to the U.S.A. on an American ship is now the only safe and sane course to pursue. When you get home we will call a meeting of the Steedman Committee and discuss with you in person the most profitable manner to dispose of the balance of your time and funds.

The U.S.A. is not Europe (may I add "Thank God," without Pharisical implications?) but over here perhaps a trip to Mexico or South America or even a study of some of our own cities may aptly conclude your interrupted programme [*sic*].

In the time you have had, you certainly covered a good deal of ground and derived a lot of profit from your observations. Let's not cry over the inevitable. Come home as soon as you can secure passage. Perhaps in course of time your contact with the sudden cataclysm will loom up in retrospect as the most interesting moment in your trip.

With sincere regret that it had to come so soon, I am  
Very cordially yours,  
[Professor Lawrence Hill]

*[editor's note: Gilbertson does not receive this letter until November 1, when he is in Athens]*

November 2. [1939]  
Athens

Dear Professor Hill,

I seem to have taken over the business of crisis where the warring countries left off. I did not receive your very kind letter, suggesting a new world trip, until yesterday.

I imagine it would be wiser to return home and I can think of many trips that would be as interesting as most things in Europe. However, since I am here in Greece and things seem to be going along rather smoothly, I see no reason why I shouldn't see the sights here and possibly Istanbul before thinking of returning. American Export line boats stop at all these Mediterranean ports so I shouldn't have any difficulty securing passage.

In one way I'm getting rather disgusted with Europe and its war but on the other hand I would like to see Italy. There are the ingredients of an embargo Crisis! If you still advise me to return, I will do so readily but by that time I will need my November 15<sup>th</sup> payment to supplement the steam ship passage that I now hold. Fares have gone up on all lines. I'm sure I would be able to secure additional funds so that the remainder of my travels wouldn't suffer.

So, may I ask for another short note from you? In a way it sounds silly I suppose, but on the other hand I want to be sure that my present situation hasn't altered your advice to me, before I set sail.

Sincerely yours,  
Victor C. Gilbertson  
American Express, Athens

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Among Gilbertson's detours was a visit to Florence, where he saw the Mediterranean influences on Italian architecture.  
*(Image: Rolf Gilbertson)*



Nov. 7, 1939  
[from St. Louis]

Mr. Victor Gilbertson  
c/o American Express  
Florence, Italy

Dear Gilbertson:

Your letter acknowledging receipt of my cable has come to hand. I am sorry that the instructions were ambiguous. You were no doubt disappointed that \$300.00 only was forthcoming in Florence. I had anticipated sending the final \$500 \$400.00 at some later stage in your travels. In view of the swiftly changing conditions, I have decided to forward this balance at once in order to leave you full liberty in adjusting your itinerary to circumstances. I am therefore giving instructions that it be sent to Naples, to arrive not later than Nov. 25.

Meanwhile, you will be seeing Italy and can make up your mind at leisure as to your further progress.

The repeal of the Embargo and the stiffening up of regulations concerning Americans in belligerent countries may interfere with your proposed trip across North Africa, which would of course take you through the French Colonies of Tunis and Algeria. Inasmuch as the Mediterranean is not included in the danger zone, it is possible that those colonies are not included in the proscribed regions. I can get no information on the subject in St. Louis. Writing to Washington [D.C.] involves delay and you can no doubt get the information directly from the U.S. Consular offices in Italy.

Thus far you have proved pretty resourceful in making the best of a bad bargain. All I can say is: use your own judgment, keep is informed of your movements, and when you are ready, come home.

Thank you for your interesting report from Greece. Wishing you continued good luck, I remain  
Sincerely yours,  
[L. Hill]



Florence Italy  
December 1, 1939

Dear Professor Hill,

On October 31<sup>st</sup> I departed from Salonica on a train bound for Turkey. . . . After many train changes, encounters with Greek officials & Turkish officials (neither of which I would rate very high) and a night sleep on the softest of wooden benches; I awake in the morning to witness the dramatic approach to Istanbul. I chance to call it dramatic because it reminded me of my own home state of North Dakota.

Fortunately, my archeological friend and classmate, Van Nice was on his vacation when I got there so we were free to travel. We went across the Sea of Marmara over to the Asiatic shores and inland to the small city of Brusa—one time capital of Turkey.

It is a charming little city nestled on the foothills of mountains and overlook a broad and exceedingly fertile valley. I had never thought of Turkey having anything approaching this in luxuriance. . . .

On my return to Istanbul I was treated to the sight of the city as approached by water. It was near sunset and the skyline of the city built as it is on hills and strung along the Bosphorus is matchless. The minarets and mosques at intervals pierce the sky in a most majestic and graceful way.

Of course the most important of all is Santa Sofia. I don't believe anyone visiting Turkey would really have to see anything else. Architecture, Art, tradition, history—all of it—at least a big share of it, is there. It rules like a Queen this vast city it seems. Roman, Crusader, Venetian, Turk all had their turn but the building remains pure and simple. . . .

Your very kind and encouraging letter I received when I reached Florence. Thank you very much. I am glad you are not perturbed about my remaining in Europe. Altho [*sic*] there are a few barriers to be surmounted yet, I have hopes that travelling will become less difficult all the time. Passports have to be renewed on the first of January and that I suppose will be the crucial time for us. I cannot get the information here in Florence that I want about travel to North Africa and Spain. However I will be able to get it at Rome and I will inform you when any further plans develop.

I am planning on going to Rome about December 15<sup>th</sup>. I understand the American Academy is opening to travelling students now since they have so few regular students. I think I shall plan to stay there if possible. It might prove very interesting.

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a happy new year.  
Sincerely,  
Victor Gilbertson

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Although they were ostensibly architectural sketches, Gilbertson's drawings were remarkably finished with great attention to composition as well, as this suggests. (*Image: Rolf Gilbertson*)



Workers document Hagia Sophia mosaics. (Image: Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Washington, DC, Trustees for Harvard University)



Jan. 19, 1940  
[from St. Louis]

[To] Mr. Victor Gilbertson  
c/o American Academy in Rome  
Rome, Italy

My dear Gilbertson:

You fill me with shame. I have not yet acknowledged your long interesting letter from [Istanbul] and here is another equally long and interesting from Florence.

As far as I can see, you are losing little by the turbulent conditions which have caused you to readjust your plans, except that you will probably be obliged to abandon your original research theme. If so, have you thought of another? Your unforeseen journeying's should have provided material for a travelogue of considerable interest . . . .

The Egyptian tour is a fine idea. Go to it! If you could only take in Crete on the way, it would be still better. Your subsequent plans to visit North Africa and Spain seem to be rather ambitious with your limited budget. . . . You appear to be decidedly able to take care of yourself and this warning may seem to you supererogatory, but please believe I offer it in a friendly spirit, for I am too well aware how easy it is when stimulated by enthusiasm and curiosity to push resources beyond their reasonable limit.

With warmest regards and best wishes, I am

Very cordially yours,

[L.Hill], For the Governing Committee  
STEEDMAN FELLOWSHIP IN ARCHITECTURE.

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Aboard the *S.S. Egeo*  
January 26, [1940]

Dear Professor Hill,

I've been spending my time since the first of the year seeing Rome. . . . On the rare sunshiny and beautiful days, I took excursions to the charming surrounding towns and their beautiful Villas Tivoli (torturous bicycle trip) and Villa D'Este . . .

We are just about to disembark at Alexandria on the greatest adventure I hope—Egypt! Five of us from the Academy are together and plan on a comprehensive three week tour touching Cairo and its surroundings, Luxor, . . . We experienced a pretty rough sea from Naples to Rhodes that put two of our number down to the lower decks but otherwise all is under control.

My itinerary remains unchanged from what I reported last to you. I'm praying that I can stick to it. . . . My address henceforth will be:

c/o American Express until Feb 20—Naples.  
c/o American Consul Madrid until March 25.

c/o American Consul Lisbon until sailing the first of April.

Sincerely Yours,  
Victor Gilbertson

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Naples, Italy.  
Feb. 23, 1940.

Dear Professor Hill,

If I had to terminate my travels right now I think I would feel quite satisfied. Several spots—interesting of course are still in store for me, yet even so, at the moment I feel the imprint of finality—of the ultimate so to speak. Perhaps Sir Galahad felt like this when he found the Grail—but I challenge him. I've drunk from the cup for three weeks seeing Egypt! It is difficult to see in things of an ancient nature, anything but anticlimax after Gizah [Giza], Saqqara, Thebes, et al. . . .

We were the only American tourists of the season and as a consequence were much sought after since we were supposed to have "plenty of money." A grim trick of fate that the only prospects these miserable mortals got were six poor students—out to get as much as possible for the least. What actually happened was that we were able to bargain donkey boys against camel drivers and hotel men against the other until we reached quite satisfactory prices. It was hard work and really quite frightful . . . to see all the outstretched hands. . . . I'm thinking that it was all good interesting experience, without which this Egyptian tour would lack a lot of spice. I firmly vow to try to get Joe Garavelli down in the price of a cup of coffee when I return to St. Louis . . . .

. . . spent 6 days in Luxor . . . We saw the important things and had time to enjoy them . . . . And what a heaven for sketching! A rock to sit on, one for a table and another for materials, good sharp shadows, simple powerful subjects and last but not least—no natives inside the premises of the monuments. I had to give up sketching in Cairo. By the time I got my pad out, so many natives had gathered that it was no longer possible to see the subject.

. . . Two days more of Cairo—seeing museums (especially the wonderful Egyptian Museum) and socializing with American teachers and Egyptian students and we were ready to take a boat again on the 17<sup>th</sup>. That briefly, is the summary of an intensive three weeks.

Sincerely Yours,  
Victor Gilbertson  
By: Atlantic Clipper  
March 27, 1940

[To] Mr. Victor Gilbertson  
c/o American Consul  
Lisbon, Portugal.

Dear Gilbertson:

Your long interesting letter giving me your “happy thoughts and sagacious observations” on the architecture of Egypt arrived with surprising expedition and I hope sincerely that your own homeward voyage will be as rapid.

As the days go bye [*sic*] and the European situation becomes more tense I find myself wishing that you would call a halt on your wanderings and beat it for home. You have been pretty lucky so far and if you feel, as you say, quite satisfied that you have seen enough, I am quite ready to concur in immediate plans for your return. . . .

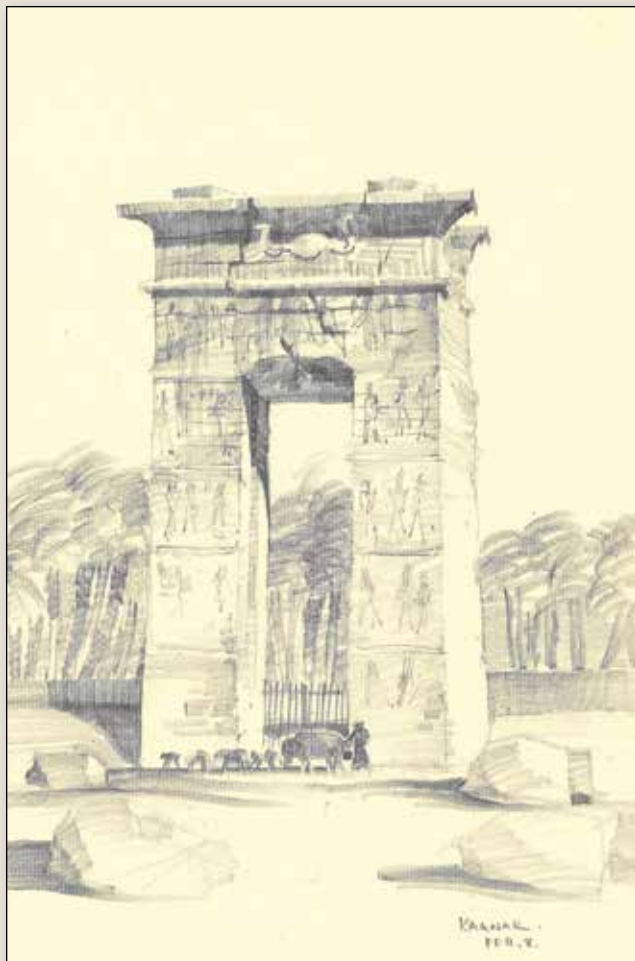
Let me add . . . my urgent recommendation that you will not delay it by a stop-over in Spain. I doubt if you will find conditions favorable for a profitable visit, and best wishes for a Bon Voyage.

Sincerely yours,

[L. Hill]  
*S.S. Exhibitor*

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Gilbertson was also struck by the architecture of the ancient world, as seen here in his sketch of Egyptian ruins. (*Image: Rolf Gilbertson*)



April 13, 1940

Dear Professor Hill,

Even now aboard an American ship and still several days out of New York, I feel quite removed from the scene on the other side of the Atlantic, but the business at hand calls for a sort of chronology, at least, of my time from Naples to Lisbon. . . .

My one and only taste of travel luxury occurred between Palermo and Tunis. No boats being available, I flew. One and one half hours as compared to one and one half days by boat! . . . Tànger [Spanish for Tangier], Tetuán [Spanish for Tetouan—Moroccan city] and Ceuta [autonomous city of Spain bordering Morocco] are largely visions of visas and travelling troubles. At the same time I was being advised not to go to Spain. My informant [*sic*] said travel was possible but difficult, prices scandalous and food scarce. If I didn't starve outright, I'd most certainly be hungry at all times. Slightly daunted but none the less determined I set sail for Algeciras [port in Spain]. After such a stormy entre I am myself surprised that I came out with anything favorable to report. I was several days late so I cut my itinerary down to include Seville, Cordova, Madrid and Toledo.

I arrived in Seville right in the middle of the famous Holy Week Festival. Had I known that all pensions and hotels were filled to overflowing I don't suppose I would have gone there and of course should have missed an exciting time and a chance to observe Spaniards at their best. That I had to take a bed at the Red Cross Hospital mattered little—in fact it made my stay even more interesting.

. . . Religious floats, soldiers, sailors, folks in costumes with pointed hats, horses, bands and thousands of candles were thrown together in what seemed to me anything but a religious ceremony. Beer vendors did a lively business. . . . Bull fight natives appeared alongside “Semana Santa” [Holy Week] pastries and on the following Sunday, Franco was to go directly from Mass to the Bull ring. The only somber note was the dress of the people. Those that weren't in mourning wore black anyway. . . .

Outwardly, Madrid seems a normal modern city. Most traces of war destruction in the main parts of the city have disappeared and a great deal of reconstruction is in progress. . . . After two visits to the Prado, a general tour around the city besides viewing one victory parade and the preparations for another, I was quite ready to move on. . . . Toledo must have been lovely before the war. Now, the effects of war is all too evident. Desolation and want are rampant, But even so—and it's significant—there is very little begging.

Adding up my Spanish visit I find it amounted mostly to an observation of the people but I feel that it was nevertheless a worthwhile sojourn.

At this point I presume the usual thing is to include a summary with conclusions, deductions and the like. For myself I think it is quite unnecessary to state anything more than that I enjoyed myself immensely everywhere I

went in Europe; I'm thankful to the Steedman Committee for allowing me to complete my travels . . . and to be quite trite but none the less sincere, I am glad to be back home.

I plan to go home for a week or so now and expect to be in St. Louis about the first of May or a few days before. I'm looking forward to that session with you as a chance to partially to relieve some interesting bits filtered thru my loosely knit writings.

Sincerely yours,  
Victor Gilbertson

## P O S T - S C R I P T

Once home, Gilbertson returned to work at an architecture firm in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and began to write his Steedman thesis. Again, the war intruded. As an officer in the Coastal Artillery, Lt. Gilbertson's last report to the Steedman Committee was written from Fort Monroe, Virginia, in July 1942:

*"To say that my life has been chaotic during the last year, year and a half, would be something of an understatement . . . We are at it 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, plus 2 hours on Sunday . . . Since our own harbor and Coast defenses are pretty well manned the most likely spot . . . will be in task forces being organized for overseas duty. Who knows—perhaps I'll see Paris yet!"*

Professor Hill's reply, as always, offered encouraging yet tempered advice. "I envy your youth and 'blithe spirit,'" Hill wrote. "May you have your wish and reach Paris in the ranks of a victorious army, but don't stop. This time go on to Berlin!"

Gilbertson's World War II service instead took him across the Pacific Ocean, where he served in the Philippines. Surviving the war, he married, became a father, and a grandfather. He went on to a prosperous life as an architect and artist, and in 2004 received a lifetime achievement award from the Minnesota chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Victor Gilbertson died at age 93 in 2005.

## T I M E L I N E

April 1939

Civil War ends in Spain with General Franco in control

March 1939

Germany invades Czechoslovakia

**June 1939—Gilbertson arrives in England**

September 1, 1939

Germany invades Poland

September 3, 1939

Great Britain and France declare war on Germany

October 1939

Poland is partitioned between Germany and the USSR

November 30, 1939

Soviet troops invade Finland

April 9, 1940

Germany attacks Denmark and Norway

**April 1940—Gilbertson returns to USA**

December 7, 1941

Japan attacks Pearl Harbor and USA officially enters war



Gilbertson took a circuitous route through eastern Europe and even Egypt, including seeing the pyramids at Giza. (Image: Library of Congress)

Additional correspondence by Gilbertson and other awardees are part of the Steedman Fellowship Architectural Competition Records, located at the University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis. Gilbertson's later architectural work is preserved at the Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. (Image: Washington University in St. Louis Archives)

