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ONE: An Early Start

I was set in motion on the 25th of March 1934. It was Father's 25th birthday, and I like to think, rather fancifully perhaps, that I was Mother's birthday gift to my Father – or maybe vice versa. Following the usual nine months' gestation period, I became due on the 25th of December, Christmas Day, at 'around 10 or 11am' the family was told. Father and Sister spent the evening of the 24th with Mother in hospital, promising to return next morning, Christmas Day, and leaving Mother rather miffed that she wouldn't get any Christmas lunch with her family. But, sensing her predicament I made a super-human effort and appeared, much to everyone's surprise, at twenty to midnight on the 24th, Christmas Eve. So Mother and I were at home for Christmas Day after all. Thoughtful of others even before my birth – as I like to tell it.

The first five years of my life, like most people's I suppose, left few memories save for the odd dramatic incidents like accidentally breaking a window pane and being sprayed with a hose on a very hot sunny day. I also, apparently, painted our black cat red, having found a pot of paint somewhere. Never any harm intended of course, then or ever since. The paint, I was later assured, had been fully and painlessly removed.

It was only when looking back later that I came to appreciate the events which were boiling up in Europe during the years from 1934 to 1939, and which would eventually erupt, of course, in the second World War. Indeed it wasn't just me. People weren't worldly-wise in those days, and seemed to have little awareness of what was going on around them. Indeed, amazing as it must seem today, the family took a two weeks' holiday at Titisee in the Black Forest in 1938 just a year before the balloon went up.

I was four years old at the time, with long blond curly hair. The length, colour and curls are now a distant memory, but the colour especially excited the Germans for whom blond hair at that time was a reflection of racial purity and greatly to be admired. My parents, in their lack of political awareness common at the time, were highly amused at the attention, as any proud parent would be, and I was apparently carried around on Father's shoulders before the admiring crowd. Despite how it may sound, that was no exaggeration. Again looking back, it seems incredible now, that almost until Chamberlain's historic announcement on September the 3rd 1939, no one had really been prepared for war.

In the early years of their marriage, my parents had lived in a small terrace house in Lewisham. Granny – on Father's side – was (as Mother tells it) quite a pest, actually fairly normal for in-law parents it appears. She would watch through her front window, see Father, her young son and apple of her eye, tearing down the road to catch his train. Others were no doubt doing likewise – indeed being late for early bus or train is alive and well today. But Granny would be straight round to Mother to berate her for not getting Father up early enough, and 'did he get a good breakfast' 'are you looking after him properly' etcetera etcetera. Anyway, they later moved to a little cottage at Bourne End in Buckinghamshire paid for in part by Mother's old flame, one Captain Stevens.

The family then found three incredibly derelict cottages in Stanwell – the village with the crooked church steeple which the pilots now use as a beacon when approaching London Airport. They started with the clearing and rebuilding works, with plans to convert it to one unit. It was a grand design and would have worked well had not the war intervened, precluding the supply of any further building materials. So we would spend the war years in a partly finished house, though comfortable and with all essential amenities.

I was just about old enough during the Second World War to be dimly aware of its progress – if 'progress' is the right word for the mass destruction of human life and the physical wealth of nations, their houses, roads, bridges, railways and places of worship. Stanwell village was near London, out of the major bombing areas but close enough to feel in constant danger at night which is when the bombing was worst.

Otherwise however, we managed to live a fairly normal life. We had rationing of course, scarcities of everything. We had ration books with points which the shopkeeper would cut out. The most 'expensive' things in terms of points were tins of fruit salad from Australia, or tins of salmon. Occasionally oranges would come in and a queue would form early in the morning as the word went round. I remembr being dispatched to Staines to stand in the queue until the shop reopened after lunch. There was a warning sign in the window: 'Please Do Not Forget Your Cabbages.' The price one had to pay for oranges! We also got the occasional delivery of bananas, though usually they would be restricted to blue, children's ration books.

But nothing is totally bad, and in many ways I benefitted from the discipline of wartime. I grew up for my formative years in a time of rationing and deprivation. You didn't shout and throw a tantrum if you couldn't have a pedal-car for Christmas because there weren't any to be had. And you never got up from a meal leaving food on the plate, as many do in restaurants these days. Rationing and general scarcity didn't give us much, and we appreciated what we had. And that, as I look back, was good. We were all healthier then, so the statisticians now tell us.

And so we spent the war, and I grew up, in a basically comfortable but half completed house. Again, memories were few but increasing in number as the years brought greater maturity, together with a growing awareness of the pervading atmosphere of wartime: the rationing and ration books, the points system for tinned goods, the much-loved radio comedies, 'the nine-o'clock news' as my parents would add. Essential for me were the Just William stories on the radio, and a little later, the Absolute Essential Dick Barton Special Agent from 6.45pm till 7, a time during which no family member would dare disturb me, my ears glued to the speakers. Next day at school, we boys would eagerly relive the previous night's episode, speculating as to how Dick Barton would extricate himself from the desperate life-threatening situation he managed to get into at the end of each 15-minute episode. I recently got some cassette tapes of the old broadcasts, and to my ears they were just as thrilling as ever.

Fortunately Father had established and nurtured a huge vegetable garden at the back of the house in which he and our neighbour, Mr. Deacon who worked for the Council, grew everything in apparent abundance: raspberries, red and black currants, all kinds of veggies – early and late cropping varieties so they went on yielding right through spring, summer and autumn. My sister specialized in tomatoes which she grew in abundance. Quickly boiled, some were then bottled and sealed in Kilner preserving jars and lasted right through winter.

The village church was well attended every Sunday. The Sunday Joint (a whole week's meat ration for the family) would be prepared and put in the oven as we all left, to be ready on our return with just a few final details. Father would 'carve' with all due ceremony.

The vicar was of substantial – comfortable – build, with shaggy eyebrows which gave him an air of authority. His wife, by contrast, was tall and thin, had a mustache, and sang tenor. I always tried to stand beside her. She coached me in the Catechism and all the other paraphernalia necessary for Confirmation, all of which I learned perfectly. A week before I was due to be Confirmed, the Vicar died. I took that as a clear indication from Heaven: Sorry, but you're not... quite the sort of material we're looking for Up Here. Chastened, I didn't pursue the matter.

We got a new Vicar. Studying the piano, I asked the Vicar if I could practice on the organ. Oh Dear. He said yes very willingly, popped in one day as I was practising, and assuring himself of my minimal competence, roped me in to play for the new Children's Service he had started at 3pm in the afternoon. That was it. I never really enjoyed my Sunday lunch after that, I was so nervous – even though it was only one hymn and Father would come to give me confidence. Still, I suppose for a boy of 11 years old, nerves were not unreasonable.

In my old age I look back on those church-going days with nostalgia and regret. I don't go now. The Old Bible had the maturity of age, the mystery and magic of language.To me, the New Bible reads like the VAT regulations. And the modern Lord's Prayer... Oh dear. In English, 'Thee and Thou' were reserved for the Deity. Now 'He' has been reduced to just one of the boys.Why can't people leave well alone. But I am not wholly reduced to atheism. Every Sunday we enjoy one of Bach's Cantatas from our collection. Sunday *should* be different, reflective.

TWO: Some Compensations

The war didn't deprive us of all entertainment. Indeed, morale at home was important, and strict petrol rationing notwithstanding, twice a year a fair came to our village. One was quite small, with swings, stalls, and a small roundabout set up on the village green. The other was much larger and was set up in a nearby sports field. This fair was owned by Mrs Pelham, whose name was proudly emblazoned on the circular facing board around the top of the magnificent roundabout, which had a steam organ and gilded horses that went up and down. The fair would arrive on a Wednesday, taking all day to set up. It opened late on Thursday afternoon, as also on Friday. On Saturday there was a small admission charge to the field itself, collected by the venerable Mrs Pelham in person, a Commanding Presence indeed, sitting on a chair at the field entrance with a small table for the cashbox and her tea. Sometimes she would wear her hat with flowers round it.

One year Mrs Pelham's fair almost didn't come. The 'advance guard' which came a few days before to check the location, declared that the fair would not come unless the field was mown – the grass was quite long at the time. The Council refused to do it, but Mr Deacon came to the rescue towing a large multiple-mower behind the Council dust-cart. I was allowed to ride with him in what I now look back on as an amazing and unique vehicle. The driver sat on a throne at the front, on each side of him his arm rested on and old-fashioned stepped tram controller, each now regulating an electric battery-driven motor for each front wheel. To turn the vehicle, you simply made one wheel go faster than the other. Fortunately its top speed was 15 mph and the local roads rarely had any competing traffic.

Father and Mr. Deacon dug a large square hole in the garden and lined it with concrete, covered it with curved corrugated iron, then covered that with earth and grass. This was the standard Anderson Air Raid Shelter. The alternative was the Morrison Shelter for indoor use, a large, solid steel 'table' – at least it could look like a table when covered with a table cloth. It was designed to shelter the occupants, who had room to sleep beneath it, from heavy falling debris in case the house was bombed.

Our Anderson shelter was not popular. It meant traipsing outside on cold winter or damp nights, sleeping on rubber blow-up mattresses. I remember being out in the garden in the outdoor air raid shelter looking out at the clear, moonlit sky and seeing one of the dreaded 'doodlebugs' – pilotless flying bombs droning overhead moving ever more slowly.

This weapon, I later philosophized, represented the ultimate in selfishness, of ‘blow you Jack, I’m alright’ because whenever you saw or heard one overhead your single thought was ‘just keep going’. The sound got deeper and deeper, the bomb moved ever more slowly, and when the fuel ran out... that’s when it would stop, and drop. Please bomb, just keep on going that little bit farther.

Later on our architect called in for a visit and told us, mercifully, that our big open fireplace, with a huge beam over it inscribed with a cross and the date 1693, was structurally so strong we could safely sleep in it. So that put an end to the Anderson Shelter, which gradually filled up with water. Meanwhile, Hitler had moved on to his next *Wunderwaffen* (Wonder Weapon) – the V2 rocket. The best part of this, if indeed one can call it that, was that being faster than the speed of sound, when you heard it overhead, it had already landed and exploded.

Father served his country during the war in two ways which seemed to alternate. In both cases he would disappear for a couple of weeks at a time. Of course his family knew nothing about his activities at that time. So it was with everyone. “Idle gossip risks lives” was one of the many warning slogans. Another one was “You never know who’s listening”. Point taken. Father later related something of his exploits. As an expert in refrigeration, he had been called to a rocket research centre in Wales – the nose cones of rockets were apparently overheating at very high speeds, affecting their performance, and needed either to be cooled or made out of some new miracle material. After the war we bought a couple of Pyrex oven dishes; the shopkeeper told us proudly that the material was the same as that used ‘in the nose-cone of a rocket’. We still have the dishes, and always remind ourselves of their pioneering feature.

Father had also been the engineer, one of a three-man crew onboard MFV 669. The MFVs or Motor Fishing Vessels, were completely constructed of wood, so the German U-boats didn’t detect them. The MFVs would crisscross the Channel, carrying spies and radio sets to and from France. The different French ‘resistance movements’ were difficult to deal with, for there were several which, far from cooperating with one another, seemed to be in a permanent state of mutual distrust bordering on enmity. The skipper knew the French coast like the back of his hand from the good old pre-war days, and given a glimmer of light – moon or near-dawn – he could pinpoint his position exactly so to meet up as arranged.

On their way back to England the crew might spot a floating mine; the mines had protruding arms which, if struck by a passing ship, would blow up. As Father recounted it, quite matter-of-factly, they’d throw a rope round it, tow it back and beach it gently, then post a guard and wait for the bomb disposal squad to disarm it.

The skipper was also a longtime member of Hamble Yacht Club, so he and his small crew could be sure of a hot bath and a good breakfast on their return. Even wars have their perks. Many, many years later we found an old beached and abandoned MFV down on the south coast. Memories.

One of my earliest memories of the war ending, apart from the general jubilation and feeling of relief, was being taken up to London, to join the celebrating crowds at Piccadilly Circus. Eros of course, the famous landmark statue now back in the centre, had been removed for safety, the fountain boarded up. But it was the crowds which made the occasion. We were densely packed everywhere, and Dad eventually put me up on his shoulders. I always remember a man with a trumpet who kept repeating “this is the hub of the Empire ladies and gentlemen”. And indeed it was.

Another memory which came shortly after the war was when I went for a walk with Father up our road, past the Little Green Shop to the Rising Sun pub where the road crossed the Duke of Northumberland's Canal. It was very shallow and we used to go fishing in it for minnows. There was now barrier across the bridge. We walked past it; there were fields on the other side and a narrow road. There was one lone house, quite substantial. A man was up on a long ladder pulling the tiles off the roof. Father explained that the man's house had been bought by the government for demolition, and building materials being still scarce, the owner was taking whatever was movable. This whole area was to become Heath Row Airport. Of course the village is now inhabited almost exclusively by pilots and others connected with the airport. The village church, where I learned to play the organ, had a crooked steeple, still a landmark for pilots today.

Many years later a friend met regularly on morning walks recounted quite a jolly story. She was walking across a London square just after the war when a voice behind called her name. It was a fighter pilot she knew well from her days in the WRAF. "We're thinking of starting an airline" he said. "Would you like to join?" She did, and thus participated in the early years of BEA and BOAC. At first they had a simple prefab as their Heath Row Reception Centre. She recalled painting the first parking lines in front as people were parking "all over the place". Early days.

After the war Father worked up in London for HMV Household Appliances designing fan heaters, irons and the like. He would often bring prototypes home for us to test. The drawing office was above the famous HMV record shop at 363 Oxford Street. One day the staff came in to find that there had been a fire overnight. The premises were OK, but the stock of records, all 78's in those days, had been saturated with water from the firemen's hoses. They were perfectly playable, but the album covers were all distorted. They were offered to the staff at scrap value: one penny a record. So Father came home for the next few days with an armful of albums – that's how the classical music came, in albums of up to a dozen 12" 78rpm discs of, say, a complete piano concerto, or Bach's Six Brandenburg Concertos. In my youth I took it for granted that all our classical music albums had crinkly distorted covers. Only much later did I learn that they were fire salvage. I grew up with lots of classical music, a major plus in my life which would provide me with the grounding for a later business enterprise.

In addition to the classics, we had a sizable collection collection of pop music. This was Mother's contribution to the family's entertainment, brought in from her pre-marriage days. During the late 20s and early 30s, as a gay young thing when 'gay' meant something quite different, she would go to Bobby's in Bournemouth – still going strong, now as Debenham's – and buy the latest pop record. We put them all on cassette and play them regularly which, as far as taste in popular music goes, puts us firmly in the 1930s! Jolly good stuff too.

One sign of normality after the war was a new bus service connecting our village with Staines, the nearest big town, where I would then start going to school. Our bus route was number 224 – one knew one's bus number with some affection! We had 20-seater Leyland Cubs, or sometimes the CR series – Cub Rear-engined. With few competing cars, the Greater London bus system was organized, as I look back, quite brilliantly by the London Passenger Transport Board from their premises at 55 Broadway. The inner London routes were numbered from 1 to 100, the next circle around London went from 100 to 200. Stanwell being farther out was in the 200s. They were all red, single- and double-deckers, all British-made of course, well made and well designed. The express country routes, the Green Lines, were in green obviously, and took passengers farther out. Like many others of my age, I had the small pocket-sized Ian Allen book of bus numbers, which I crossed off whenever sighted. No, one ever cheated, that would have been unthinkable. Services were frequent, and well-used until the 50s when people started wanting cars...

Thus began the slow transition to a 'modern society'.

THREE: Switzerland 1946 – the joys of Peacetime

In August of 1946, I think it was the 15th – anyway it was circled on my wall calendar and I just couldn't wait for it to come – we went to Switzerland for a two weeks' holiday. How did we manage it, when travel was restricted and there were strict exchange controls for the Pound Sterling? Our secret was having an uncle who was Managing Director of the great Thomas Cook Travel Agency in London. Anyway the date came and we were on our way. We took the boat train from London to Dover, then the little channel steamer. I say 'little' because we still have some old photos and it was very small compared with the floating palaces crossing the channel these days.

In France there was as much fuss going through Customs as if we had just arrived from the moon. Our baggage was laid out on the low counters in the long cavernous hall, French porters running around shouting for business, in fact all the fun of a cruise. I remember a porter – they all had grey cotton coats with numbered badges on brass plates – grabbing our luggage and racing towards the counter shouting "je vous approche, Monsieur le Verificateur". When we finally got on the train to Paris, of course I found the carriages quite different in shape (much higher) and as we were travelling third class we were fully exposed to the French 'wildlife' – to my memory they seemed like a lot of rough peasants continually eating rough bread, and garlic in abundance. Perhaps they were.

The scenery from the windows was pretty desolate, lots of ruins and the scars of war. In the restaurant car, we had coupons for food which were supposed to give us a meal at lunch and at dinner, but the waiters argued that they only gave us the main course, and the rest had to be paid for. The food was uninteresting and the coffee undrinkable. I say this not because I lack sympathy with the war-torn French (we were pretty war-torn too and severely rationed), but rather to accentuate the contrast we experienced as soon as we entered Switzerland.

We got off the French train at Basel and had a wait of about an hour on the station. Even for a major junction, it was still quite small at that time and pleasant, nothing like the monster it is today. We relaxed in the warm sunshine of the early morning. The Station Restaurant spilled out onto the platform and we sat under a pergola with green vines growing up and around. We had crusty rolls and the most delicious croissants, with unsalted creamery butter and that delectable Swiss Black Cherry jam, accompanied by wonderful coffee and hot frothy creamy milk. Being only five years old when the war started, I had never tasted anything so sumptuous. It would be the first of many pleasant experiences, rewards after five years of war.

The Swiss trains seemed to glide effortlessly through the countryside as we made our way up to Kandersteg in the Bernese Oberland. Looking back, and having frequently travelled on Swiss railways since, I would guess it was a combination of good suspension and ribbon rail. On long journeys I had plenty of time to learn "do not lean out of the window" in multiple languages. The French version *instructed*: "ne pas se pencher au dehors" (do not incline yourself to the exterior). The German, with its strange grammatical order, also *instructed* one: "nicht hinaus lehnen" (not from inside to outside to lean). The Italian version in contrast chose not to instruct but rather to *advise* that: "e pericoloso di sporgersi" (it is perilous to extend oneself). Well yes. One can imagine. I also learned that a Notbremse is an Emergency Brake.

I mention these trivia because it was interesting to me to be exposed to multiple languages in this way, as it would be throughout our stay in this multi-lingual heartland of Europe. Anyway it was a long train ride and reading the signs passed the time in alternation with watching the scenery.

At Kandersteg we stayed at the Hotel Schweizerhof, a fairly substantial yet friendly hotel, now turned into apartments. We went on long hikes in the mountains. I remember the signs, in old German Gothic script, which said "Es ist strengt verboten, die Pflanzen und Blumen zu Pflücken" which Father translated as (in a strong German accent) "It iss fferboten to pfluck ze pflants und pflowers!" As a posted Regulation it seemed rather heavy-handed at the time, but a friendly local explained to us that this was to preserve the indigenous species – a concept quite alien to us at that time, and one which the rest of the world only cottoned onto some thirty years later. The hotel would give us packed lunches: two thick wedges of dark bread with a slice of cheese and ham in between, and an apple. Rather uninteresting, I thought, when I checked it at the hotel. But after four hours of fairly arduous climbing, it was all very welcome, and devoured with enthusiasm, washed down with Grapillon, Swiss natural grape juice, and when that was finished, clear mountain water.

The hotel had a large conservatory, with palms and a high, partly glassed roof, in which we would take afternoon tea. There was a band playing – the usual combination of pianist, clarinetist, and a drummer with a straw hat who periodically acted the fool throwing up his drumsticks, all led by a very serious violinist who played with great bravura and directed both the band and the tea proceedings with the authority of a general. A large tea trolley would be moved quietly about the conservatory, laden with a selection of mouth-watering cakes – cream cakes, fruit cakes, chocolate cakes... with of course extra dollops of whipped cream in abundance. The trolley would be moved from table to table for guests to make their selections... but only, and very strictly only, when the orchestra was silent between musical items. It was like a game of musical chairs – every time the leader tapped his violin bow to start a new piece, everything had to stop. One was even required to eat with decorum so as not to make any excessive noise with the cake fork or teaspoon.

It seemed to my young mind that whenever the cake trolley was just about to reach our table... the music would start and everything would freeze. I just couldn't wait for the orchestra to stop so "life" could resume and the trolley could at least reach our table! My only consolation as regards the orchestra was the drummer. If I, or anyone else, caught his eye he would start acting the fool, throwing sometimes his drumsticks, sometimes his straw hat into the air. The violinist would turn to face him and reprimand him with a stern look – though it was probably all part of the act! Not part of the act was the requirement that we all listen attentively, or at least appear to do so. An elderly lady next to us who was hard of hearing carried on eating her cake and – horror of horrors – dropped her fork onto the floor. The waitress instinctively rushed over to pick it up and give her a fresh one, and... the violinist simply stopped playing in mid-tune, resuming only after having coldly received suitably apologetic glances from the waitress, and the head waiter who had joined her (the elderly lady herself carried on eating quite obliviously).

The Schweizerhof was not quite what we would expect today – hotel standards have changed immeasurably. Rooms didn't have their own private baths, just a washbasin. Toilets were at the end of the hall. So was the one bathroom (I use the word in the English sense of a room with a bath in it). And you didn't just help yourself. The bathroom was kept locked, and if one wanted a bath, one made one's wish known at the Reception Desk to be given an appointed time – and charged for it. The toilets, or 'bathrooms' in American, were marked not with male/female dolly figures, but with 'Damen' and 'Herren'. Learn and Observe!

All in all, a wonderful, eye-opening, and privileged experience which introduced me early in life to the wonders of 'abroad'.

Mother sent a couple of postcards to our next door neighbour who was looking after our six chickens. When we got back she asked if we had enjoyed our stay at the Par Avion hotel. Such was the general knowledge of 'Europe' at that time.

A later treat, also courtesy of Thomas Cook, was a holiday in the newly opened Cap Estel hotel on the south French coast. Affordable then, as was pretty much everything, it later became a playground exclusively for the rich, then later still a private enclave, with black-uniformed heavies who approached menacingly anyone who lingered around the periphery for too long. Looking back, I now see it as a gradual and widespread move towards increasing inequality.

FOUR: The Orient Express

After the war, with servicemen and women being de-mobilized in large numbers, jobs were hard to find.

One day a poster appeared on the notice board of the village hall. There would be a film show next Friday. Each man was given a suit of 'civvies' and a grant – £500 if I remember. A Mr Nigel Balchin of nearby Chertsey used his grant to set up a mobile cinema – a 16mm sound projector with stand and screen. He would rent a feature and a couple of supporting films for a week, and edit the main film, which would come in 3 or 4 reels, into one huge reel for which he used extension arms. He would then "do" a different village hall each day of the week. Our Stanwell village's day was Friday. His choice of feature films was always 'just right' – not too bland, not too violent, always stimulating and varied yet always with popular appeal. The exception was the inevitable Serial, which necessarily had to leave the hero in suspense thus forcing customers to come again next week. I especially remember 'The Clutching Hand' in which a vital formula for some world-threatening substance had been stolen and in trying to recover it Our Hero got into all sorts of dangers – always right at the end of each episode of course.

Father applied for a job as Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineer with the Iraq Petroleum Company – what was to become known to us as the good old IPC. He was delighted when he got the job, especially as the salary and pension were very generous. The negative was leaving the old country and setting up in Iraq. For the first year no wives were allowed and the men lived in bachelor quarters. That was because the company knew from experience that many would have had enough after a year! Those who stayed the course and signed on for five years got married quarters – a prefab at first. Mother joined Father as soon s permitted – they were very attached to one another, and also... as Mother confessed to me later, Father was "a bit of a ladies' man" who really need a wife to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Father and Mother lived first on a pipeline station in the desert near Kirkuk, K3 Station where the pipeline crosses the Euphrates River, then later down south in Basrah. The desert, as it was around us in K3, was not shifting sands as far as the eye could see. Rather, if you imagine an English countryside with mountains, hills, and valleys... then take away all grass, hedgerows and trees – that's what our scenery was around K3. Except that is, immediately after the spring rains, when everything was briefly – all too briefly – covered in green.

My summer hols in Iraq were a great privilege which I thoroughly enjoyed – and lorded over my schoolmates. Though Mother went out to Iraq with Father, staying loyally with 'her man', she was not very happy at the prospect of leaving me in boarding school in England. But sorry Mother, I was delighted. Schoolboys just see things differently. For a start, Mother wrote copiously and frequently from Iraq, making sure to write the address as compactly as possible and cover the rest of the envelope in Iraqi stamps – quite splendid affairs with portraits of young King Faisal, and the various infrastructure projects going on around the country.

So as I arrived back at my ‘house’ for lunch from classes I would be besieged by stamp collectors and would trade the stamps with the highest bidder.

And when the long summer holidays came and my fellow inmates would go home to some anonymous village, city or suburb of England, I would be off to Iraq. Fortunately, for me anyway, flying was far too expensive in those days, so instead of a boring and overlong flight I was forced to take the land route, and that involved the legendary Orient Express.

Today the Orient Express is known as an expensive tourist ride, or a fictional setting in films or on television: Hercule Poirot solved his most famous case on it, Alfred Hitchock’s lady vanished from it and James Bond rode it from Istanbul to London. But in fact this tradition is not entirely fiction. Turn the clock back to the early years of the 1900s, and two forces were at work in Europe.

Already in the 1780s, the great Ottoman Empire began to weaken, as European powers gained strength and began to vie with each other for access to resources and markets in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Most of the northern coast of the Black Sea had slipped away by 1812. The Ottoman Empire lost Greece, Egypt, and Serbia to European-inspired independence movements over the next 60 years. By 1900, Turkey was known as the “Sick Man of Europe”.

A map of the Ottoman Empire would be on the wall of every government military and diplomatic office in western Europe, each of the major powers, Britain, Germany, Russia and France shading the areas it hoped to gain. In short, the Ottoman Empire was dying, and the vultures were circling. Britain and France were eyeing the middle east, Germany was already supplying trains to Turkey with plans to extend into Syria, and Russia had its eyes on the Crimea, Bulgaria and Romania. That was the first piece of the picture.

But the vulture nations also faced a major tactical problem: communication. Telegraph was not always available and in any case was not secure, documents sent through the Diplomatic Bag travelled at railway speed, while pigeons were unreliable and could easily be deflected temporarily or even permanently by a farmer's wife too generous with the grain and hoping to fill the Sunday Pot.

So deals were there to be made, sure enough. Sheikhs from the deserts of Iraq and Syria, and down through the Arabian peninsula found themselves virtually independent as Turkish influence waned, and were definitely “open to offers”, while Russian “agents provocateurs” were infiltrating their own coveted territories quietly disrupting Turkish government operations, fomenting revolution and no doubt supplying the necessary hardware. The deals were there, but they had to be quickly made, and preferably sealed with hard cash.

The combination of fast deals requiring quick decisions, and the lack of rapid and reliable communication with the home government gave rise to the Minister Plenipotentiary, a minister “full of powers” from the Latin *plenus* (full), and *potens* (power). Foreign Ambassadors are still known by this title today, though with Powers greatly diminished and generally devoid of glamour.

The Ministers Plenipotentiary were thoroughly briefed by their respective Foreign Offices, given a pile of cash, a Gladstone bag to carry it, and a padlock and chain to secure the bag to the wrist. They were then sent out among the territories of the Ottoman Empire to grab – buy – whatever they could. And how would they travel from London, Paris or Berlin to Istanbul? The Orient Express was the obvious solution – and on board, each agent would no doubt rub shoulders with competitors following their own agendas.

From the late 1800s through the early years of the following century, the map of the old Ottoman Empire went through a kaleidoscopic change of colours as claims were staked and sovereignty – of sorts – established. And by 1912, the Ottoman Empire had lost nearly all of its European territories, with the Middle East following after WW1.

When I travelled the Orient Express in the 50s it was still in regular passenger service, and there remained much drama in the form of unfriendly frontiers, foreign countries and their passengers, and the often pervading feeling of indeterminate danger. The Iron Curtain was firmly in place, with the attitudes of mutual mistrust that went with it. Our train would pass through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, two 'Communist' countries allied loosely (Yugoslavia), or more securely bound like Bulgaria.

I would take the boat train from Victoria, across the Channel to Paris Gare du Nord. Thence a wild taxi ride – Parisian taxi drivers in the 50s were all wild, and indeed a stubborn remnant remains – to the Gare de Lyon. There I would walk along the platform past an interminable line of boring grey postwar French carriages with the big windows you could open right down and pass luggage through. Then, in the centre of the train, the Jewel in the Crown – the blue and gold carriages, their flanks proudly bearing the words *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* "Company International of the Carriages-Beds". This was the heart of the Orient Express: one Restaurant Car, and one, two or three Sleeping Cars, operated by the legendary Thomas Cook and Sons Limited.

I would show my ticket to the Conductor, then to be directed to my sleeping compartment, and as the train slowly pulled out of Paris, my adventure moved into a new, more dramatic phase.

The "True Blues", the two or three Wagons-Lits coaches, these would go right through from Paris to Istanbul. But the rest of the train would change colour, like the chameleon, as it went from country to country. It would travel through France with its French coaches and engines to cross the border with Italy at Ventimiglia.

At Ventimiglia the train would stop for at least two or three hours, while little men in dark blue or khaki uniforms would swarm up and down the train stamping passports, checking luggage and changing money, all making a lot of noise and fuss. With a lot more shouting and shunting, the French coaches and engine would be removed and replaced with Italian stock which would take us to Ljubljiana, the crossing into Yugoslavia. Here we would spend another two or three hours going through the whole procedure again.

One could walk freely up and down the length of the train through inter-connected coaches – we Royal Patrons were not prisoners in the True Blue coaches. In France and Italy one walked for exercise. In Yugoslavia it was a much more interesting experience.

The Jugoslav carriages were particularly fascinating to me; they were short, two-axel (no bogies), with open balconies at each end and wooden seats throughout. The seats were arranged in fours, and each foursome would be occupied by a family group, men and women dressed in black, women with black shawls over their heads, the men wearing black caps. They always seemed to be huddled together sharing rough bread and home-made cheese wrapped in white cloth, and drinking red wine, again probably home-made, out of plain bottles.

The dining car offered tables for two or four. Being a lone traveller I was always seated at a table for two, then to be joined by a stranger. Sometimes we managed snatches of conversation in a mix of languages (I with English and fairly competent French), sometimes silence. Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman.

But always, in my young eyes, my dining companion would be a spy, an "*agent provacateur*", or a Minister Plenipotentiary, a Minister-full-of-Powers-and-Cash returning from his home capital to his Embassy in Sofia, Istanbul, Damascus or Baghdad carrying the wherewithal to bribe some local dignitary into declaring his undying allegiance to, in our case, the Crown. I imagine a suave British agent entering the Dining Car, immaculately turned out in full evening dress for dinner, shown to a table for two already occupied by a sultry Russian beauty in tight-fitting gownless evening strap. As she gets up to leave she deftly flips open her huge diamond ring releasing a dash of white powder into his wine, then placing her hand lightly on his shoulder she whispers "Compart-i-ment Seven. Aeee weel bee aahlawn..." Thus a schoolboy's fantasy.

Each sleeping carriage had its own Conductor, who kept all the passports in a black leather doctor's bag which he would lock away in his own small compartment. This would spare the passengers from being troubled with customs and passport controls at each frontier. But apparently – thankfully actually – it didn't always work.

I recall being woken in the middle of the night at the Bulgarian frontier by a loud knocking on my compartment door. Alone in the compartment, I was sleeping in the lower bunk with my head right by the door. I reached out, unlocked and opened it slightly – it was as always on the safety chain. I was confronted at very close quarters by an unshaven officer, sweating profusely in his thick khaki uniform with a bevvy of assorted armaments, handcuffs and unidentified hardware on his belt, almost overpowering me with heavily garlic-laden breath. "Passyporty, Peppers, Weezum (=Visa!), where you go... What for you come to Bulgaria?" Fortunately the Conductor came to my rescue.

After Bulgaria I had two choices: get off at Athens and take the Greek boat to Beirut, or continue to Istanbul and take the Turkish State Lines. Either way there was a bit of language-learning to do, specifically I would need to learn the Greek alphabet and a few essential words of Turkish.

My first visit took me via Athens. English was not the universal language it is today, and at that time, in Greece without the Greek alphabet one could have considerable difficulty getting around. It is easy to take for granted the Latin alphabet in most continental European countries today, so even without the language, one can at least read street and shop signs. But in 1950s Greece, street names, destination indicators on trains and buses, all required a knowledge of the Greek alphabet. You could go to Athens with a reservation at the Olympic Hotel and be standing right in front of it without knowing, if you couldn't read Greek letters on the sign.

For my second and subsequent visits I preferred Istanbul – it was far more oriental and exotic to my young eyes. There was no alphabet problem here, as Kemal Ataturk, Turkey's first President after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 swapped the Arabic alphabet, never wholly suited to the Turkish language anyway, for a slightly modified Roman one. But some vocabulary was still essential.

At Istanbul Sirkeci Terminus (the western one) a worried little man perspiring profusely in thick dark blue serge uniform with "Wagons-Lits" on his peaked cap would run up and down the blue carriages shouting "Vaggonleecoook, Vaggonleecoook". And here I must make a confession, actually in anticipated self-defence lest a reader might think I'm making it all up. A thirteen-year-old boy travelling alone on the legendary Orient Express... it does sound a bit like a schoolboy's fantasy, but... well not exactly.

There was always the Thomas Cook man, and my uncle was at that time Managing Director of the great Thomas Cook's in London. And not only that. Thomas Cook was the appointed agent for the Iraq Petroleum Company, responsible for all their travel bookings. So I was 'twice blest'!

My name was on their lists wherever I went from London's Victoria Station to the Mediterranean. And when we finally arrived in Istanbul, just such a worthy gentleman would fix me up with a decent hotel, hand me a city guidebook, and after a day or two's liberty – depending on maritime schedules, he would see me to the port, onto a ship of the *Devlet Denizyollari* – "Of the State the Sea its Routes" which would take me to Beirut for my trans-desert journey to Baghdad.

In Turkish I was required to learn what might be considered the first two words basic for any traveller: *Erkeklere*, and *Kadinlara*. *Erkek* means a man. *Erkekler* is men in the plural. And *erkeklere* means "for men". Similarly, *kadinlara* means "for women". In those days toilets, bathrooms, restrooms didn't have the little international dolly signs you see today. The Men's Room said *Erkeklere*. It was important to know.

Say you're traveling from Istanbul to Beirut on the Turkish ship. You wake up the night feeling the pressure of the dinner wine, you toddle down the passage for relief, but don't know which door to go through. During the day you can watch what everybody else is doing. But at 2am? OK so you take a chance, and happen to use the wrong one. Just as you are about to leave, two black-veiled ladies enter. It's a Moslem country, and ladies always go about veiled, and generally in pairs too for some reason. They see me in 'their' toilet and begin to scream shrilly and uncontrollably – whether out of horror or excitement I would not have time to wonder. As I hurriedly open the door to leave, their husband comes out from a cabin door just along the passage, resplendent in Damascus silk robe and neck scarf, a curved jeweled-handled Hedjaz dagger in his hand (you should never go out without one). It's bye-bye moi and hello shishkebab. So right: *Erkeklere* means Men, *Kadinlara* means Women. Learn it!

On the Turkish ship we were treated to an occasional film show. A large screen was hung up on the well deck – the ship also carried some freight, and the projector was on the first class deck overlooking the forward well deck. We, the First Class Passengers (note capitals!!) sat on either side of the projector on folding canvas chairs. The projector was a French Heurtier able, thanks to interchangeable gate and sprockets, to show 8, 9.5 or 16mm sound or silent. The projectionist was ultra fast on the reel changeover, a process I watched in fascination.

As the top feed spool emptied he'd have it off and the new full spool in its place. He'd stop the machine just long enough to thread the new film, then start and away. The old full spool would then be taken off and a new empty put on, with the film running meanwhile and spilling frighteningly (to me) onto the deck. But the end was quickly located and retrieved, clipped onto the new take-up spool, and the spill was taken up. The result, from the viewer's point of view, was that the reel changeover was so fast, the story's continuity was hardly interrupted. As school projectionist I later perfected this technique to the amazement of all!

Once in Beirut I would try to delay moving on as long as possible. I loved the newness of it all, the Arab ways and language. Having been under the French, many Lebanese people had more than a passing knowledge of the language, so I could communicate fairly easily, though I later learned Arabic, both spoken, and the beautiful cursive script, so flexible that a word or phrase can be turned into an art-form.

The Lebanese are not true Arabs, but Phoenicians, and trade runs in their blood. The narrow souks excited me and I trod fearlessly – thank Goodness Mother didn't know. Actually, although perhaps for some recently arrived Westerners I might be appearing to take my life in my hands, in fact everyone was friendly, there was no crime, and I was perfectly safe.

The IPC Mess was on the second floor of an apartment building and I was interested to note the subtle differences in the language of the multi-lingual Out of Order sign. In English it was a simple Out of Order. The French was *ne fonctionne pas* – an also disdainful statement of malfunction. The Arabic was much more positive: *ghair salah lil ista'amal* which means *not quite perfect for the use*. Surely more optimistic, and closer to reality, considering that in all the lift's complex workings probably only one small replacement or adjustment would need to be made.

From Beirut, with help from the IPC agents, I would board the Nairn trans-desert motor-and-trailer bus for the long two-day/night journey to Baghdad.

The journey was generally eventful, the scenery somewhat repetitive. But crossing the border into Syria was always a trial. The 'Customs Post' was a small mud hut at Palmyra. Luggage had to be brought out and laid, cases open, at the side of the road. The customs men seemed to take pleasure in rummaging through and often spreading one's clothes on the dusty road. Interesting to me was the difference between the countries through which we passed. From cosmopolitan Lebanon, through Syria where people seemed bitter and unfriendly, to Iraq where everyone was so welcoming. This was not just my impression. It seemed to be accepted among the pipeline crews and anyone who travelled regularly along the pipeline. Certainly the friendliness of the Iraqi people was my own dominant impression.

In Baghdad I might rest a night at the then-new and decent Tigris Palace Hotel. From there I would take to the *Sikuk Hadeed al Hakouma-t-al Iraqia*, the "Roads Iron of the State Iraqi" either north to Kirkuk, or later when my parents moved, south to Basrah. The carriages were British-built, smart, clean and comfortable, well serviced by the immaculately turned-out, white-jacketed staff.

The journey north was overnight, but although I had a sleeping compartment to myself, I found difficulty sleeping, for periodically the train would stop in the middle of nowhere with not a sign of road, track or habitation. Lights would come on over each doorway and a few people would get out, mostly men, dressed in Bedouin costume with bags over their shoulders and on one occasion, an accompanying goat. They would disappear into the night, the lights would go off, and the train would be on its way.

At Kirkuk my parents would be waiting with a company car, a Humber Super Snipe pickup, and driver of course, for the journey down the pipeline to K3 Station where the pipeline crosses the River Euphrates, and home.

FIVE: Life on a Pipeline Station

A pump station in the middle of the desert... doesn't sound an amazingly attractive place to live. Yet it had a life of its own, and I certainly found plenty to occupy me having completed the necessary 'holiday homework' and Arabic lessons, spoken and written. We used the ubiquitous 'Van Ess: Spoken Arabic of Iraq' just like any other aspirant Arabic-speakers. One of the first phrases in the book was 'Jib chai, min fadlek' – bring me some tea please. The first time I visited Father's workshop where fridges and air conditioners were maintained, I tried this phrase on one of the Iraqi staff – just showing off my new accomplishment really, without much attention to its meaning. Five minutes later he brought a tray with a small pot of Basrah Lemon tea and a bowl of sugar. I was surprised, but quite delighted at my first attempt at successful communication!

Those more adventurous souls who braved the Arabic script, again using Van Ess, would encounter very early, on page 4 actually, a rule of grammar which became a catch phrase even among non-Arabic students: “when hemza with dhumma occurs in the middle of a word, the carrier is a waw; if hemza occurs with with kesra, the carrier is a ya without dots”. As indeed one would expect.

K3 was a small community, not more than a thousand British, though many more Iraqis. There were bungalows for the British ‘staff’, later even two-story houses faced handsomely with rough-cut local yellow stone. We were to get one of those, as they replaced the old pre-fabs. The gardens had grass, trees and flowers, with local gardeners of course. Water pumped up from the Euphrates kept the gardens green. Evenings on the lawn were pleasant. The Station had a swimming pool, a social club for dances, tombola etc and a stage for plays and variety shows put on by the Station’s own ‘talent’. All quite fun.

There was an upper-level projection room in the social club, facing both into the club, and outwards into the garden, the two projectors could simply be wheeled across. So we had films outside on the lawn in the cool of summer evenings. The films were 16mm so, unlike 35mm used in regular cinemas, were non-flammable and so could be safely transported along the pipeline by air. Two Bell & Howell projectors ensured smooth changeover between reels. I used to go up into the projection room and ‘help’ Hassan, the operator. I’d manually rewind reels, and even do the changeover later on. One watched the screen through the little window; when the first black spot appears in the top right hand corner of the screen, start the second machine running, and at the second spot, switch the lamps. One can still see the black spots in old movies shown on tv today.

After the Saturday film the fire crew came along with their pump and through most of the night pumped all the water out of the swimming pool. It had no circulation or filtration and lasted a week between changes. The pumped out water was spread over the lawn and all the many adjacent flower beds. They couldn’t get enough of it.

The film would be later shown to the Arab workers in the aircraft hangar. They probably didn’t understand much of it... But it was free, and an ‘evening out’.

Four times a week I would go horse riding, with the Station Superintendent’s two daughters and Mr Pond, an engineer, who taught us to ride. We would leave the Station and drive out into the desert a couple of miles in Mr Pond’s pickup, he and the two girls squashed in the cab, me in the back. Our destination was a Police Post on the Euphrates River, a simple, fairly high mud-walled enclosure, an open courtyard inside with six stables around it, and a hut for the *Sice* – the Hindi/Arab word Iraqis use for the groom who looks after the horses. His name was Ahmed, such a friendly chap, always pleased to see us – and indeed we to see him.

The first thing my ‘instructor’ did after I had successfully mounted the horse, was take the two 50-fil coins I had been told to bring and insert one each between my knee and the saddle. 50 fils was an English shilling, and almost my week’s pocket money for me. He explained: no matter if you’re walking, trotting, galloping, even bareback... if your knees are gripping firmly you’ll never come off. I held on tight with my knees, and never lost my pocket money, but for the first few days, my thighs were trembling!

The Iraqi desert was not flowing shifting sand dunes, but dried mud, a dramatic landscape of valleys and hills – imagine the English countryside but without any water, grass or trees. But for a few short weeks in spring, when the rains came, it was all magically green... then gone. The varied terrain was nonetheless enjoyable for riding.

We would ride up to the top of a low hill, to be confronted with a wonderful view of what would have been a fertile valley with a river running into what had once been a lake.

Father always used a favourite quote from the Indian Army: first the horses, then the servants, *then* yourselves. We too attended to our horses on return, removing and wiping down the saddles, reins and bit, then giving the horses a good rubdown – which they thoroughly enjoyed – and only then repairing to Ahmed's little cabin – a simple mud hut built in a corner against two walls with a roof of logs, straw and mud. Ahmad would make tea for us with Basrah Lemons, small, hard dried lime/lemons which were crunched up in boiling water, served with lots of sugar in tiny glasses on saucers. Be sure to stand a spoon up in the glass before pouring the boiling liquid so the glass doesn't crack! The room was bare, a plain mud floor, just a Primus and a bed. We all squatted on the floor and drank well sugared lemon tea from small, four-inch tall glasses while Ahmed and Mr Pond chatted amiably in Arabic. A pleasant end to the ride which was often quite wild – 'never gallop the horses once you're facing back home – you'll never stop them'.

From time to time Father might have to go down the line to one of the T stations. This necessitated crossing the Euphrates River which was accomplished with the use of the Blondin. Charles Blondin (born Jean François Gravelet, 1824–1897) was a French tightrope walker and acrobat. His real name was Jean-François Gravelet but became widely known as "The Great Blondin". At the age of five after six months training as an acrobat, he made his first public appearance as "The boy Wonder". From then his various tightrope acts became more and more daring, including several tightrope walks across the Niagara Falls after he moved to the United States.

A substantial and well-anchored cable had been strung across the Euphrates, and 'Our' Blondin consisted of a platform suspended from it. Our car would drive onto the platform, which would then be drawn across the river. Whether we made a hard or soft landing depended on the operator. A bad operator would maintain speed until the last moment, leaving the suspended platform to stop suddenly, then swing to and fro until it settled. A good operator would gradually slow down as the suspended platform neared the end, so to dock smoothly into the receiving platform. Once 'anchored' we would drive off and continue on our way. If it sounds a somewhat hair-raising way to cross a river - well it was rather. Certainly exciting for a 14-year-old boy, but fairly matter-of-fact when you did it quite often as the pipeline crews would do.

These were good years in Iraq. Now you may think, here's a spoilt English brat from a spoilt English family enjoying a colonial life of ease, surrounded by an army of native servants whom they pay a pittance and treat like dirt, to fulfill their every whim and do their every bidding. Well, it wasn't quite like that. We did have one 'servant' – they were generically known as 'house boys' though ours was not a boy but a mature gentleman who was conscientious, honest and a good cook. He and my mother treated one another with mutual respect and indeed a degree of mutual affection.

In any case, the climate in the Iraq Petroleum Company was absolutely not a racial one; promotion was on merit alone, with no distinction whatsoever as to race. Indeed, Iraqis were encouraged to expand their skills, and any young man showing ambition and promise would be sent to engineering school in England at the Company's expense. And on the other side of the coin so to speak, any English employee exhibiting any kind of verbal or physical racism would be dismissed on the spot and flown back to England contract terminated.

During one hot summer sojourn with family in K3, the station experienced particularly heavy through-traffic – we were to get a brand-new pipeline, must larger than the existing one which seemed almost 'domestic' by comparison.

The ‘pipeline story’ started in the 1930s, when the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) commenced the development of a pipeline project to export crude oil from the Kirkuk oil fields to international markets via the Mediterranean. Construction on the the 12-inch diameter 1,150-mile Kirkuk to the Mediterranean pipeline was started in 1932 and completed in 1934, the year of my birth in fact. The first stretch to Haditha had three pump stations known as K1, K2 and ‘our’ K3 where the line crossed the river Euphrates. It then divided into two lines, the T line and the H line to deliver oil to Tripoli, Lebanon, and to Haifa, Palestine, though the H line was blown up shortly after the state of Israel was created. Engineers and pipeline crews returning from Israel after closing down pump stations came back visibly shaken by the brutality with which Arab families in what became Israel were treated by the Jewish Authorities. Many families with ties going back centuries were forced to leave at gunpoint, with no recompense. Most re-settled in Lebanon; we would later come to know one such family very closely.

In1950, with Western demand for oil increasing exponentially and capacity already reduced by the loss of the H line, the IPC contracted Bechtel to construct a new, 32-inch line from Kirkuk to Banias on the Syrian coast. British, American, Syrian, and Iraqi workers laid the pipeline using the latest machinery of the time, much of which was built especially for the project.

The huge lengths of pipe were transported by the Mighty Antars, heavy-duty tractor units built by Thornycroft from the 1940s onwards. For some decades it was the standard tank transporter of the British Army and was also used by other nations. The civilian version of the Antar was developed in the late 1940s as an oilfield vehicle for transporting pipes over rough ground. The name ‘Antar’ was a reference to Antar Ibn Shadded, a pre-Islamic Arab poet-warrior. The intended lead customer for the ‘Mighty Antar’ was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, previously the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, and this rather fanciful nomenclature was a deliberate move to flatter the customer. It would have gone down well in Iraq too, for those familiar with their own history. For a teenage boy in K3 as these great monsters rolled through, it was an exciting experience, the monsters were so large that our Humber Super Snipe could park comfortably under the massive trailer.

People often say that when they turned 60+, they began to appreciate their parents, for themselves and for what they had done for their offspring. This was certainly true in my case, and continues long after Father died and with my 60s now a distant memory. Father had a brilliant mind, and was keen to explore everything. He made some of the best Mosel-type white wine I have ever enjoyed, as well as mints and chocolates. He also enjoyed making patterns in stained glass, explored classical music as well as jazz. He had always been good with people and public relations and when a new opportunity opened up he moved easily from engineering to personnel management within the Iraq, and later the Basrah Petroleum Company.

Personnel Management was a relatively unknown art at that time (late 40s, early 50s). Father assiduously cultivated a good rapport with his Iraqi staff, strict, yet always encouraging. When he left the Refrigeration Dept on K3 Pipeline Station to take up the new position in Basrah, his staff clubbed together and knowing his almost professional interest in rugs and carpets, secretly dispatched one of their number to Isfahan, Persia, there to his village which was, apparently a famous carpet weaving centre. What particularly moved Father, indeed us all, was that such a gift from staff to departing heads was certainly not customary, and definitely not to that extent. The carpet has long remained a family treasure.

Once in Basrah, Father moved fully into Personnel Management. He became concerned that there was no clear method of measuring work, thence relating work to pay. Thus was I introduced at a fairly early age to the concept of Equitable Payment and its pioneering proponent Elliott Jaques, later pursued by Lord Brown and others.

The idea was transparently simple: that there should be some meaningful, and just relationship between work and reward at all levels and in all types of work, ideally consistent throughout the company.

Nor has that view had any cause to change. I see very clearly the damage done to our economy and thus our prosperity resulting from the absence of an accepted relationship between work and reward. At the 'top', salaries and bonuses of incredible heights are awarded to top execs who at best do little real work and at worst ruin the company, while at the bottom workers struggle to survive amidst potential plenty. Social injustice indeed. But there's worse.

Economic expansion towards full employment and scarcity of workers prompts rising wages and encourages price inflation, which in turn requires government or central bank to halt expansion while there is still substantial unemployment especially in the economic periphery which in practice means anywhere beyond the Capital.

This whole sorry cycle of boom-and-bust against a background of permanent structural unemployment appeared to my young and idealistic mind as nothing short of economic anarchy, a view which has only deepened with increasing years. Thus Father and Elliott Jaques fomented revolution in my young mind!

The early 1950s were good years for Iraq in that the country had a stable, sensible and relatively honest government under a monarchy – King Faisal, cousin of Jordan's King Hussein – and each long summer holiday when I went there, something had improved – a new road, school or hospital, an extension to the airport, new street lighting.

I was encouraged to mix with Arabs of my own age, and later when we were in Basrah, my father, as by then Chief Mechanical Engineer, always encouraged local businesses to tender for contracts, rather than looking inevitably to England as had previously been the case. When I say that the 50s were good years, I am looking also through the eyes of the teenagers I mixed with. Many of them knew some English, and as a youngster I picked up quite a bit of Arabic, backed up by formal grammatical study and vocabulary, so we had no problems communicating.

While teenagers and college students traditionally criticize government and promote revolution, in Iraq most of the teenagers I knew were very happy with the way things were going, and seemed confident that they had a bright future, both for themselves and their country which they held in respect and affection and which they had no ambitions to leave. Sunnis and Shias, now at daggers drawn, were totally relaxed with one another, and even inter-married. Little could they, and we know that this would come to an abrupt end in July 1958.

SIX: An American Experience 1952

1952 was a year of great revelation and a measure of personal freedom I had not yet known. An English "public school" (which, as one needs to inform Americans, is not a public school at all but a private college) allows very little personal freedom save, like the old socialist states of the erstwhile Soviet Bloc, freedom to engage in such activities as are deemed appropriate by one's lords and masters.

In 1952 I left my English public school and took up educational residence in an American school in Beirut, bearing in mind my parents being in Iraq so I could go 'home' even in the shorter holidays.

Beirut was and is of course the capital city of Lebanon, and, well, it was then just one of the world's great places to be. It was sophisticated and dynamic. Its situation was, as it still is, an integral part of its charm, since it lies on the shores of the Mediterranean with snow-covered mountains behind and to the side as the coast curves round. Thanks to the French legacy, there were trees and trams in the streets, reliable power and water, and business flourished, not only high-level trading reflecting Lebanon's position as the gateway to the Middle East, but also and more fascinatingly in the shops and souks where the price was and is what you make of it. I had of course heard of the word "hibernation" meaning to rest and spend the winter somewhere, derived from the Latin *hibernis*. In Lebanon I learned from its tourist blurb the word "aestivation" from the Latin *aestas* meaning 'summer' – Lebanon being a popular summer destination for wealthy desert Arabs seeking a respite from the 120-degree heat of their hinterland homes, as indeed it remains.

Populated mainly by the American sons of Aramco employees (Arabian American Oil Company, based in Saudi Arabia), the school was situated on the coastal Corniche, with direct access to the rocks from which one could swim. Above and beside was the treed campus of the American University of Beirut – AUB. From the school one climbed 158 steps to the road running along the cliff above. Here there was an Uncle Sam's which served hamburgers and Cokes to homesick Americans and to those Arab students at the American University who felt that such Americanisms enhanced their youthful images. Next to it was Faisal's where I would go for a long cheese sandwich in crusty French bread and a bottle of locally made pomegranate juice. From this upper street one could take a shared taxi into the downtown area; the more adventurous such as myself, could take the tramway. Being a public transport enthusiast I became familiar with the entire "fleet" of motors and trailers, and many of the drivers.

The trams themselves were simple two-axle vehicles built, according to the legend on the electrical controller, by Les Ateliers de Construction Charleroi. No date was visible, but rumor had it that they were built and shipped out in 1920 when, in the aftermath of war and the distribution of Turkish spoils by the 'victors' the French 'took over' Lebanon and Syria, while the British awarded themselves Jordan and Iraq. The trams were green, as were the matching trailers, with open balconies at each end – though with some driver protection for colder weather. The drivers and conductors all wore smart khaki uniforms, always immaculately turned out. When one knew the driver of an approaching tram one would give a slight signal, and the tram would slow down so one could jump on between stops. A few drivers I knew would slow down for me if they saw me – a great honour I always felt. The balconies were generally crowded, often with people hanging onto the outer rails. Inside there were wooden seats for second class (5 piasters) and straw seats for first class (10 piasters), the latter being occupied mainly by ladies, some clad totally in black, other as brightly as in any European city.

Passengers on the balconies, whether on motorized cars or trailers, had duties which the experienced were expected to fulfill. At the rear of the driving car there was a large circuit-breaker which would occasionally break with a loud explosion if the driver accelerated too quickly. The tram would coast to a standstill as the driver applied the handbrake. Someone was expected to reach up and push the handle back, then shout "mesha rooh" to tell the driver he could proceed.

The duty pertaining to the front balcony of the trailer car related to the pickup, a long pole with a brass wheel at the end which collected power from the single overhead wire. The wheel would occasionally slip off the wire thus rendering the tram powerless. Somebody in the front of the trailer car was well positioned to reach forward towards the rear of the motorcar, pull down the rope which was attached to the pickup, then try to juggle the little wheel so it got back under the overhead wire. It was fiddly and quite an art. Again, one gave a loud shout so the driver would know he could proceed.

Finally a peculiar duty was expected of anyone standing at the rear of the trailer's balcony. The Kurdish porters were a race, and a 'profession' unto themselves. If one bought an item of furniture like a wardrobe or a bed in town and wanted it delivered to one's home one hired one of the ubiquitous Kurdish porters to do the job. He would walk, slightly bent, with the item secured to his back by a wide fabric band around it, then around his forehead. There was a large protruding buffer on the trailer on which the Kurdish porters would deposit the bed or wardrobe they were transporting for their clients. The nearest onboard passenger would be expected to hold the rope which secured the object while the porter got himself onto the tram and could take control. It was only the meanest conductors who would charge the Kurdish porters the 5 piasters fare.

I got to know the director of the tramway undertaking and he suggested I get a student pass for free travel. He gave me a form which the Head Teacher had to complete, together with the inevitable school rubber stamp. The form was in French one side, Arabic the other. Naturally I made sure to give him the form Arabic side up – it never does any harm to bring teachers down a peg or two, especially Heads. I had to get a passport-style photo, which was duly appended and integrated into the pass. The result was a year pass, which I would nonchalantly flash before the conductor to the amazement of my American fellow travellers, leaving them to wonder silently at my mysterious and enigmatic relationship with the tramway company.

On a more serious note, I took organ lessons from Miss Farr, the Organist and Choirmistress (a real word?) and was at once roped into the choir as a bass (disappointed – I always preferred the tenor part). Choir practice was twice weekly in Miss Farr's apartment. For the Anthems, we sang a lot of Purcell which I much enjoyed. I was often asked to 'teach' the other members to sing in English – that is, not to rrrr their R's.

We, that is the Anglicans, had a splendid church which we shared with the Armenians while they were building their own church. They had the church from 9.30 till 10.30, then we had our traditional time of 11 onwards. I always went very early. The church had regular opening windows along each wall to let in the cool breezes, and I would stand by the window next to the organ and watch, fascinated, the organist for the Armenian service, Salvador Arnita, known simply as Arnita. He would sit at the organ, not a note of music in sight, head held up with his long shoulder length hair, looking always upwards, accompanying the hymns with fanciful harmonies, and playing extensive improvisations as the congregation assembled and departed.

My weekly pocket money in England had been one shilling and sixpence, a sum considered respectable by one's English teachers and parents, but which, probably intentionally, was quite useless for anything but the most meager of purchases. It would, for example, buy a ticket to the cinema or a half pound of summer cherries or a couple of chocolate bars. No risk of loose living there.

When I went to the American school in Beirut I was given a little more pocket money – one Lebanese Pound which at seven to the Pound Sterling in those days came to two shillings and something, certainly an improvement. But compare this English parental generosity with the pocket money allowed my American colleagues, who got a minimum of ten Lebanese Pounds for the youngsters (my juniors) rising to fifty or even a hundred for the older sons of wealthy Texans (who, as I learnt at that early age, really do like to be bigger than everybody else). Such relative poverty did not allow me to experience life as others did and in the manner to which I felt I ought to be accustomed, and from this strong motivation grew an intimate knowledge of Arabic, of Lebanese traders, of the maze of warrens known as the souks, and of the art of trading.

I made one particular friend in the Souk who owned a small shop well-placed just a few doors from the main street – about as far as any tourist would probably dare to venture. I suppose tourists might also take comfort seeing me, 'a white man' in safe and confident conversation. My friend would introduce himself as George to English people, or Georges for the French – all part of the act. Continuing, he would engage the tourists in conversation then ask where they were from.

If the reply was "America" he would bring out his wallet very confidentially, and show lovingly and respectfully a photo of FDR; if the tourists were English, it would be Churchill, and if French, General de Gaulle. Many a business today could be so responsive to customers' sensitivities.

Filling in background, I told him how in 1933 during the American Depression, with at least a quarter of the American workforce unemployed, President Franklin Roosevelt launched his New Deal of Public Spending to stabilize the economy and provide jobs and relief to those who were suffering. I told him how Winston Churchill was a legend in Britain, not only for his wartime campaign planning and leadership, but almost more importantly, his resounding speeches which gave courage to both the troops and us at home.

I told him how General de Gaulle, in typical French fashion, retired to a Stately Home in England, near Bath and well out of bombing range, together with five of France's Top Chefs (to preserve La Patrimoine de la France), for the duration of the war, re-appearing magically when peace was safely won to lead the Victory Parade into Paris – a gesture to French Pride to which the British and Americans, having done all the fighting, diplomatically acceded. Though this story was delivered with a strong health warning - not to be repeated to French customers!

Rather foolishly over-estimating George's knowledge of European war history, I suggested that just in case any German tourists might appear he should have a picture of Adolph. His response was immediate: absolutely, yes. Can you get me one? I quickly put him right.

In earlier times, any peoples east of Suez were referred to as 'Wogs'. This was not, as some of those today who are over-concerned with political correctness might suspect, a term of insult. Rather the letters WOG stand for Wily Oriental Gentleman, a term coined by early English tourists and employees on their first encounters with the Orient, and surely no less applicable to my Souk friend, together with I suspect most of his fellow traders. Wily indeed!

In similar vein, the English sometimes refer to the French as 'Frogs'. This again is not a derogatory term (sorry to disappoint those who think they are using one!). It was in fact a term used in the 16-17-hundreds by country French when referring to the townspeople, especially Parisians, for whom frogs' legs were a delicacy (and still are apparently, though as a long-time vegetarian, I speak not from personal experience). Since we're on the subject of acronyms, another one coined in the 1800s and still alive today is POSH, now meaning haughty or arrogant. In fact the letters POSH were used on the luggage of senior civil servants and their wives travelling to or from India in the days of the Raj. POSH stands for Port Out Starboard Home. Since travel was basically East to West or vice versa, and ships had no air conditioning, it was important to have a cabin on the shady side, in effect, Port side on the outward journey, Starboard on the return home. And why 'Port' and 'Starboard'? The ancient Viking long-ships were propelled by a dozen or more rowers on each side. In the bow, the Captain was in effect a conductor, orchestrating the crew to start and stop, to back-paddle, and of course to row in rhythm and in unison. Bringing up the rear was the steersman, standing on a special platform protruding on the right hand side and using a single oar to guide the ship. So the right hand side was the starboard, or steering board. Clearly, if he was guiding the ship, it would have to be moored on the other side, thus the Port Side. So much for trivia.

Returning to Beirut, I look back, and I have to admit I do so without shame, on the reputation I soon obtained as someone who *dared* to go into the "Arab Quarter" and could reliably come out alive bearing any article anyone found he or she might need. Parker pens (actually Barker pens with a "B" made in Hong Kong) were my first hot-selling item. Then I picked up what I called a ring (my father called it a knuckle-duster and demanded its instant removal from my finger) in the form of a devil's head with two red eyes. This became for a time a cult symbol in school and at a profit margin of 500% contributed substantially to the improvement of my financial status.

On another occasion a friend asked me to obtain a flag for his home state of Washington. I found a source, a toy shop with an expert and well-informed seamstress who procured a 'flags of all nations' book and supplied the article, perfectly made, which I passed on for a suitable profit. Of course, after that as a matter of prestige everybody had to have their own State Flag in their rooms. And so life went on.

Though I was not ashamed at the rampant exploitation of my fellow students who appeared to have little or no sense of the value of money (those few who did were always given a special price), I look back with the deepest embarrassment at my primeval social behavior. I had spent my immediately previous educational life at an English public school, where social relationships are based on the principle that there are juniors and seniors, and the seniors bash the juniors. As a junior I was frequently bashed, on one occasion indeed beyond the bounds of personal tolerance; I am pleased to say that as a senior I never took advantage of my privilege to bash my juniors.

The English school was also, but of course, for boys only, so one had neither desire nor opportunity at school to acquire or to practice the social graces needed when accompanying the gentler sex. In the American school the contrast could not have been greater. Boys and girls were intermixed, and not only did the boys treat the girls with a polite elegance, the boys were even respectful, civilized and amicable towards one another. I was not accustomed to such a high level of social conduct, and looking back I see that I never did succeed in rising to their level. If any of my fellow students should look back to those far-off days, I shudder to think how they would remember me.

On the other hand, the experience was bound to influence me positively, and in later years, when I found myself spending a considerable time in North America, I had a foundation of American friendliness on which I was quickly able to build.

In addition to adventures in the city souks, one could take a bus, for a very small fee, north to Tripoli or south to Tyre and Saidon, rather adventurous even for me, and generally in the company of one of my more adventurous American friends. On one occasion, a friend and I rented a modest motor bike – a simple process involving a small local repair shop with a few machines to rent or sell, a price agreed, and little else in the way of tiresome formalities. No license or helmet required.

We toodled gently up into the mountains, stopping frequently to enjoy the magnificent views. We came upon a large flat area planted with apricot trees in several terraces. Periodically spaced in the paths between the trees were small mud frames with a large iron pot in the top and room for a fire underneath. A gardener told us they made jam during the fruiting season – 'it is exported all over the world'. The fruit simply went off the tree and into the pot. I often wonder subsequently if it belonged to the Cortas family business – they still make fabulous apricot jam which we obtain whenever we can. I emailed them recently to make inquiries but received no word in reply. Not really surprised!

SEVEN: Her Majesty Calls. 1954-1956

At that time, in the words of John Dryden, ‘every swain shall pay his duty’ and we all had to do two years’ National Service. The Recruiting Office offered me a choice of Stoker in the Navy, or Royal Marine, which was to be my first choice. But the prospect was utterly horrific. Think about it. Two years of one's life wiped off the record, no idea what sort of hell lie ahead, and no choice but simply “do and die”.

But like so many things in life, it didn’t turn out at all as expected – or feared. The other recruits were a great bunch, from all walks of life, thrown together and so forced to get on with it, and with one another. A spirit of camaraderie quickly developed, and friendships made with a strong bond of mutual assistance.

The training was rigorous, but the constant drilling produced a unity and a precision of action. A drilling display by the ‘Royals’ in full dress uniform (Number One’s) in a Copenhagen stadium produced a roar of applause, as the stadium cracked with the sound of a hundred hands striking a hundred rifle butts, in perfect split-second unity. We were proud.

Later, doing sea service on HMS Tyne, Flagship of the Home Fleet, we did one cruise up to Trondheim, then another to Gib and Spanish ports.

Another highlight was an exercise at sea involving the transfer by rope of a crew member from another ship requiring medical attention to the fairly sophisticated facilities on HMS Tyne. This caused great excitement on board since the transfer exercise would involve none other that the Royal Yacht Britannia, with the Duke of Edinburgh in evidence on deck. Quite an honour. And memorable for some time after.

In those blessed days, life on board ship was way more civilized than I would imagine it is today. Our mess deck had portholes through which we could see real daylight. Not so today’s matelot who spends his/her serving life in artificial light. Note the ‘his/her’ as the modern navy now also employs ladies. Hmmm. We also at that time slept in hammocks. During the day they were tightly rolled and bound in traditional fashion and stored. At night they were slung from hooks in the deckhead (ceiling to landlubbers).

On joining a ship, you wandered around hammock over the shoulder and inquired carefully as to where you could ‘sling it’. A pair of hooks were a billet, your regular spot, which was always respected. I slept on deck all year round, storms at sea included, as there were deckhead hooks everywhere. On really hot nights in the Med, many others came up on deck to sleep, but my billet was always respected. I was on the starboard side, so when we tied up, normally on the Port side, for a visit or at Pompey (Portsmouth), I always got a quiet night.

One major advantage of the hammock - actually a life-saver for those who got seasick - was that it swung, no, on the contrary, it remained vertical as the ship swayed in rough seas. Several mess-deck oppos regularly got seasick and retired to their hammocks as soon as we headed out to sea. Your mates onboard, by the way, were usually referred to as ‘oppos’ the word oppo, inasmuch as anyone bothered to consider its etymology, was a reference to one’s opposite number. We were divided in two ‘watches’, port and starboard, one of which was always the Duty Watch. Originally I suppose, your oppo would be the person in the opposite watch who’d do your job when you’re ‘off’. But then it came to mean simply a shipboard mate.

In autumn 1956 my 2-year period of National Service was nearly over, and during the summer of that year, I still serving on HMS Tyne, now moored in Portsmouth Harbour during the historic first visit from Russia of the Ordzhonikidze – incidentally I only recently learned that Bulganin and Kruschev were on board, as I suppose they obviously would be. Whatever might have been going on between politicians, for us ordinary Marines and Seamen it was an interesting and very pleasant experience as we visited one anothers' vessels. In both cases we and they as visitors had pretty much a free run.

I and a friend duly paid a visit – the Russian shipboard life interestingly different from our own experiences. The Russian crew slept in one big area in 3-tier bunks – bedding all made-up neatly as to be expected. The patterned linoleum floor was a little unexpected. We were also quite free to enter the holy of holies (to us) – the Officers' Mess. Dark red everywhere, the carpet, chairs, thick table cloth, dark red curtains covering most of the window area. Very Victorian!

We came across the Public Address cabin on the top deck and got chatting as the radio operator spoke quite good English, from listening to English radio stations no doubt. He was playing Russian pop music on 45rpm 7-inch records over the system. I only had to mention I really liked one particular tune – he immediately took it off and presented it to me. I have it still. Next day I went into town and got an appropriate replacement as a return gift which clearly delighted him.

What rather fascinated us all was the Ordzhonikidze's procedure for arriving and leaving. The Tyne would move slowly parallel to but away from the jetty in traditional English fashion then throw out ropes and get winched in. De-docking was similarly laborious involving tugs. Not so with the Russian vessel which 'parked' itself much like a car at the Mall. The secret of course lay in control. The English way is for the captain on the bridge to swing the speed control to slow or dead slow, which registers down in the engine room. The engineer duly performs the required action and responds.

On Russian vessels the Captain on the Bridge (in the case of the Ordzhonikidze as I recall, a burly no-nonsense woman) controls the engines directly, much as a car drive does. So maneuvering the vessel is direct and simple. Result: the Ordzhonikidze rode straight in alongside the quay and parked inches away. Quite amazing for us. More impressive yet was her departure. Revving up the engines, she cast off and proceeded unaided a short way further into the harbour, executed a smart 'three-point turn', and was on her way home. No assistance, no tugs fussing around. Just up and off.

HMS Tyne was a Destroyer Depot Ship. A few days later one of our Destroyers went out for a day, and on returning, the young Lieutenant captain decided he'd moor alongside the Tyne... the Russian way: he 'drove' straight in alongside, badly scratching paintwork and causing a few dents in both hulls. More practice needed – or preferably direct engine-control from the wheel-house!

All in all, National Service was a very positive, even enjoyable experience. The panic was to come afterwards. So that one would not grossly misbehave on one's last day, we were given two months' terminal leave, during which we were still officially on active service and could be recalled at any time.

On July 26, Colonel Nasser, Egypt's President made a speech in Alexandria in which he mentioned the name 'de Lesseps' , one of the Founding Fathers of the Suez Canal. It was in fact a code word by which key staff of the Suez Canal Company would know that, as of 'now' the Canal and its operating company were nationalized, taken over by the state. 'de Lesseps'... And lest it be missed, Nasser repeated it 14 times during the course of his speech.

Apparently Harold Macmillan, the British PM was having dinner at Number Ten with the French Ambassador when they were given the news. Well. So much for dinner. The French Ambassador was furious. Macmillan a little more reserved (in both cases, typical?), later making his famous "Winds of Change" speech with regards to the general demise of Empire. However a response was clearly needed, if only to retain imperial self-respect, and troops were to be dispatched post haste. HMS Tyne was among them, and me on terminal leave...

On Saturday as usual the family went separate ways for various weekly shopping duties, forgathering at a favourite cafe for a light lunch (my favourite being Welsh Rarebit with tomato on top). During lunch Mother produced an envelope from her bag: 'Oh by the way, a letter came for you'. It was in a brown envelope with the dreaded letters OHMS. That's it. I'm being recalled. Total relief when I opened it and found a cheque for Five Pounds Seven Shillings (a lot in those days) as 'under payment'. Relief. But it was close. I was in 864 Squad and several colleagues in 865 a later squads were recalled.

My major concern was that I would be shipped to Egypt, there required to shoot Egyptians, their only crime being their government's nationalization of the Canal, something which I could never do given my background and many Arab friends. And for Goodness' Sake, when the Socialists got in after the war, they nationalized the Railways, Coal, Steel... Just about everything.

EIGHT: Journeymen 1956-58

A common tradition in baroque times was that of the Journeyman. The word 'journeyman' comes from the Late Latin *diurnalis,* 'daily' which means a day's work or a day's travel. In parts of Europe, as in later medieval Germany, the word came to mean spending time as a wandering journeyman moving from one town to another doing a day's work in each if one could find it, thus to gain experience of different workshops, cultures and local customs. It was an important part of the training of an aspirant master. Carpenters in Germany have retained the tradition of travelling journeymen even today.

Similarly, though on a completely different social and economic level, the sons of English aristocrats were sent to Europe in order to further their education aesthetically and culturally – to learn about the art and culture of Europe, to become a *connoisseur,* and learn refinement at the hands of the supposedly more refined aristocrats of Europe. They might also learn the languages and customs of other European countries and prepare themselves for employment as ambassadors, so to participate in England's newly acquired role in world history. This became known as the Grand Tour.

It was more in this latter tradition that my brother and I, having completed a full education, decided to 'take to the road' and experience life free and far from parental influence. Though we would be making for the Middle East eventually, to meet up with them in Basrah, we had no set timetable and had no idea how long we would be... till the money ran out perhaps. Along the route we hoped to travel 'on the ground' rather than tourists off the ship for a day, living on the very little we had, as best we could. And so it turned out to be. It was and remains a memory of a time of leaning, excitement, challenge, and total freedom.

Young readers today might take a two-week rail pass and enjoy Europe in the relative comfort of youth hostels – but woe unto any young traveller who failed to call home at least every hour. It was different way back then. If you wanted to call England from France or Italy you set aside the morning.

You went to the main post office, only a major city would do, and placed an order for your call. You might wait an hour or two. There were few international lines, and they were already overworked. Indeed, even small towns and villages had only one outward line – two wires slung up on posts by the roadside. And only one caller could use that line at any one time. So basically, 'goodbye, see you when we see you'. It may sound horrific by today's standards, especially for doting – and constantly worrying parents. But for us it was accepted – though Mother later confessed she shed more that a few tears on our departure. And so we were off.

The easiest – and the most expensive – was the train to London, then across the Channel to Paris, and thence to Venice. Third Class of course. From Venice we took an Italian ship to Piraeus, Greece. We travelled Deck Class. This was the Lowest of the Low. There were four classes, with descending quality of accommodation and dining facilities. The last was Deck Class, no accommodation, no food, no nothing. The price was attractive though, and made barely an impression on our budget. We had bought bread and fruit before joining, and ate sparingly. It was July, so the nights were pleasantly mild as we slept out wherever we could find a secluded space. Fortunately we were allowed the use of the third class washrooms!

The journey took three days, with several ports of call along the way, so fairly entertaining. The ship also carried some freight which would be unloaded by the ship's own onboard crane accompanied by a lot of shouting both on board and ashore. The High Point was the part through the Corinth Canal, with its high steep banks (a bridge above seemed miles away), and banks so close you could almost reach out and touch them.

We left the ship at Piraeus with very little formality – the Customs and Immigration people clearly regarded a couple of teenage tramps with rucksacks as beneath their dignity. We took the electric train, carriages built of wood with two circular portholes at the front for the driver, for the short commute into Athens. We bought a water melon and sat in the shade of a rock outcrop almost directly beneath the Parthenon. From here we could look down on the sprawling city. There was no hurry to do anything, a pleasant experience we were to enjoy for a considerable time to come. Absorbing the atmosphere and view was enough, plus the new and pleasant sensation of being entirely 'footloose and fancy-free' – a sensation now truly experienced as we felt we had reached some sort of a destination.

These famous ruins, nowadays teeming with tourists from all four corners of the circular globe, were almost deserted, as we wandered around marvelling at the enormity of the structures and the blocks supporting them, always with the view of the city below. As we walked down, first along narrow rocky paths, then widening into narrow streets all paved with large stone blocks, the evening was cooling and it was time to think of a bed for the night. A small, very basic-looking hotel (we had no Greek, but had at least learned the Greek alphabet) miraculously appeared – it seemed clean, scrubbed floors and a nice lady to welcome us, so we settled for what would be a week at the price of a few pennies. A small bakery round the corner supplied fresh sweet and savoury pastries, and the water was very drinkable.

We explored the narrow streets of Athens, often sitting at an outdoor table for a small coffee and its accompanying glass of water, watching the passers-by, and the (mostly) men at the adjacent tables, chatting or reading the paper, playing trick-track noisily as tradition requires, some just sitting, playing absently with the ubiquitous string of beads which would be swung around the hand, or clicked one by one as if each had some individual meaning – as well it may have done. In Moslem countries while clicking the ninety-nine beads one silently recites the ninety-nine names of Allah. Allah has a hundred names, but the hundredth is known only to the camel, hence the animal's permanently superior expression, and the respect with which they are generally treated. Once seated with a coffee cup – full or empty – in front of one, there was no rush, no reason in the world to get up and move on, such seemed to be the spirit of the time and the place.

Our next move was on a small inter-island boat which took us to the island of Chios, just a short trip then to Çesme on the Turkish coast, now over-run with who, having destroyed their own countries now impose themselves on others, while frequently fighting among themselves as they wait. A mass migration which can only have serious longterm consequences.

Arriving in Çesme, we first paid our respects to the Customs Office. The office was wide open but no one there. Just a desk covered liberally and rather chaotically with assorted papers, the ubiquitous and essential portrait of beloved Kemal Ataturk on the wall above the desk. We hung around and after a while a lady passing by noticed us, hurried away and returned with an official putting on his jacket. He spoke a few words of English and told us we needed Weezum, for which in turn we needed a photo. The Photographer, an amiable gentleman duly sent for, sat us one at a time on a convenient bollard. The resulting 'negative' picture with its black-white in reverse was then itself photographed, producing a barely recognizable positive image. On return to the Office, these were stapled into a page of the passport. A totally dry rubber stamp was then banged repeatedly onto a totally dry inkpad (which sat permanently open in the hot sun). Conveniently at that moment a lady appeared with a small tray bearing three small cups of coffee and three glasses of customary water. While we by invitation partook, the pad was doused with water from the Officer's glass, the resulting impression producing a pale and barely recognizable image on each passport. 'Have a good time in Turkey' he wished us, with a warm handshake for each in turn. Thanking him for his hospitality we went on our way.

From there we took a train across the breadth of Turkey to Mersin down in the southwest corner where we settled for a while. The long train was hauled by a monster steam engine, built, so we were told, in Germany just before the first world war, when European powers were competing for 'influence' in the Arab world, newly emerging from the Ottoman empire. The train would stop every hour or so at some major town along the way, and passengers would get off for a leg-stretch and perhaps to buy bread or fruit or a more elaborate meal from the many vendors who had come for the occasion. There was no ceremony, no flag-waving or whistle-blowing to send the train on its way. At the appointed time the train would simply whistle and start. But the acceleration was so slow and laborious it was easy to jump on as the train got going. On return to the compartment, various purchases were offered round and shared with fellow passengers.

As we finally got off the train, now with very few other fellow travellers, we were accosted outside the station by the then-ubiquitous horse and buggy. We said we wanted somewhere to stay, and with no further prompting, the driver took us to a large traditional-style Turkish house. The interior was built around a two-floor-high carpeted atrium, with a desk and a gentleman, presumably the owner seated behind it. He greeted us warmly with a few words of English, and showed us to a room with two beds, a couple of easy chairs, and a balcony covered in vines which was to be our home for several weeks at an almost nominal rent. We would buy food in the market, or sometimes go to a little restaurant nearby where a good meal was to be had for 'peanuts'. It was basically a garden, with home-made tables and chairs, white embroidered cloths on the tables. The kitchen was entirely open, one could walk through and choose one's menu. The main feature was a large brick enclosed fire lined with white tiles. There were holes in the top surface where conical pans would sit for their contents to be cooked slowly and gently. We enjoyed the vegetable stews, with rice and flat bread. A glass each of local wine cost a few pennies more.

A single carriage, four-wheel tramcar rattled at high speed along a country road to a nearby beach where we would swim every day. As we came out of the water a young boy would mysteriously appear from the bushes with a tall earthenware pitcher on his shoulder. Again for just a few pennies, he would douse us with fresh water to wash off the salt. This seemed to be a regular facility, and we became good friends.

Eventually we felt it was time to move on. But the preparations didn't go all that well. First off was to get visas for Lebanon. There was a Lebanese Consulate in a modest apartment building and we tried several times to see the Consul. Each time we would knock on the door and a window in the door would be opened by an amiable plumpish lady clad only in a flimsy pink nightdress. When we asked for the Consul the answer was inevitable and predictable. Her face wrinkled into an expression of deep regret she would say "he is gone to the mountain". Eventually we gave up.

We also made several attempts but our 'landlord' seemed by then to be out all day and it was several days before we could catch him to pay him. Eventually we settled up and made our way down to the quay where a small passenger/freight ship of the Turkish State Lines was waiting. We bought our tickets – very cheap as we would travel deck class – no accommodation, no food, for the overnight to Beirut. Actually it wasn't. We woke up in the morning covered in oil smuts from the funnels, only to find that for some reason we hadn't moved at all. Only later that day did we eventually cast off for Beirut.

We arrived late the next morning. Of course we had to get visas, and the customs officer took our passports and left us stranded on the boat until late afternoon when he finally returned with passports and we could leave the boat and get something to eat, our first thought fairly predictably after two days without food!

The next day we found an apartment which, though our first attempt, turned out to be an absolutely perfect and very affordable home. It was on the roof of a prestigious building looking directly onto the sea, very cheap precisely because it was simply a block-house on the roof, and horror of horrors for the appropriately prestigious residents, the lift didn't go up that far so the last lap was stairs only. But for us it was heaven. Small, but everything we needed. A shower-toilet with a water heater, a 'kitchen' consisting of a marble surface with sink and place for a primus, a tiny living room and bedroom, all opening onto a wonderful flat roof, probably as big again as the apartment. It was fully paved in terrazzo, with a very oriental six-sided fountain – you just turned the tap on.

The view was over the sea, and as the coast turned a right angle, we could see the mountains with the famous cedars. There was a small mosque opposite and the minara, the tower from which the muezzin traditionally calls the faithful to prayer, was on the same level as our apartment. So we were woken at 4am every morning to the sound of a click, a short burst of scratching, then the recording of the Call to Prayer, sung on this record by the wonderful Sheikh Abdel Basat Mohammed Abdes Sumud. Needless to say we inevitably learned it off by heart, never since forgotten in fact.

There was an oven on the street corner – literally a tiny nook in the wall with just room for a clay oven.From here we would get fresh daily bread (khubz) – with a choice of flat Arabic bread, or Armenian bread, a round, yeasted loaf a couple of inches high. A few paces further on we had the tram stop, and a grocer who had everything we needed. All in all quite a nice setup.

When Brother and I made a brief stopover in Beirut during the early 1970s we were dismayed at the degradation of the city we had once called home. Trams gone of course, replaced by badly maintained French Chausson buses, the drivers dressed not in neatly pressed uniforms, but in, well, just about anything. Later still we followed vicariously through news reports the prosecution of Lebanon's 17-year long Civil War (1975-1990), seeing among many others, images of the office block where we had worked, and the big Rivoli Cinema, both in near ruins.

Rumors throughout Lebanon, as old friends told us were unanimous: the war had been started, and was financed entirely by 'the Jewish'. Who knows. As the civil wars in Iraq and Syria have subsequently shown, Arabs are quite capable of starting and prosecuting civil wars entirely unaided and without any outside prompting.

"*Why do religions rage so furiously together?*" to paraphrase Charles Jennens in his script for Handel's Oratorio, and more interestingly, why did inter-religious fighting replace the older-style battles for wealth and territory? Perhaps we humans just need to have something to fight about, an enemy to rail against, an evil force against which to contrast our own virtuousness. A relatively harmless game, unless of course it leads to war. Today it's Russia. One day perhaps, it'll be China. One thing appears to be certain, we humans don't seem happy unless our world is constantly teetering on the brink of self destruction.

As a final thought, watching now in some amazement and sympathetic dismay as two Moslem sects, Sunnis and Shias do battle with one another overwhelming both Iraq and Syria, one might care to recall that in 1588, not so long ago in historical terms, Philip II of Spain sent a fleet of ships with the intention to invade England and convert the Protestant Heretics back to the True Catholic Faith. It required an Act of Parliament (1702) to establish the Protestant Faith as our 'State Religion' which our Monarch as Fid Def on our coins (Fidei Defensor or in the feminine form Fidei defensatrix) swears to defend and uphold. Even today, inter-sectarian rivalries are alive and active, often violent, in Northern Ireland. "*Why do religions rage so furiously together?*" Indeed.

NINE: Beirut to Basrah

We had been living and working quite happily in Beirut until May 1958 when Lebanon's Election Time came around. This routinely involved bombs on the tramcars and random acts of violence. Such was – and is – Democracy in the Middle East. Business went right down – quite something for the industrious, commerce-minded Lebanese, shops pulled their metal shutters down almost to the bottom, so customers had to crawl under, as we did to buy our groceries. The publicity and printing business went down too, and the three Lebanese staff melted away to their homes in the mountains, appreciating at once that there was little money to pay them. We packed up our scant belongings and went down to see the Holy Land, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They were not 'occupied' by the Jewish at that time and still part of Jordan, so we could go there without having to get second passports.

We visited Gordon's Tomb in Jerusalem, a lovely peaceful place with a garden around it. Right next to the bus station, we then took a 14 bus up to the Mount of Olives then walked back down. We also went down to the Dead Sea and swam, or rather floated, in its highly salted water. Then to Amman, capital of Jordan. From there we took a local bus across the desert to Baghdad. Scheduled to take two days, it eventually took four. The price was cheap, 250 fils in the front ten rows, 200 in the back. Why the difference, we asked the driver. He explained that the front wheels turn, and the front of the bus turns with them. But the back wheels don't turn so the back swings around like a child being swung around on father's arms, causing travel sickness. So if you don't travel well in a car or a bus, sit at the front!

There was a crew of two, a driver and a mechanic who doubled as a driver and did his best to do on-journey repairs as various faults appeared or maintenance was required – actually quite frequently. The two would change over without stopping as the bus drove rapidly along narrow desert roads, hardly discernible through drifts of sand.

The passengers were mixed, Bedouins who didn't speak, the ubiquitous goat (the chickens were in cages on the roof), some travelling salesmen, an Imam and a school teacher, both of the latter providing interesting conversation.

Several travellers brought goat skins containing drinking water. These were hung on the outside of the bus so the passing air and condensation kept the water cool. A discussion arose because someone suggested the water should be shared, a view supported by the Imam who said that water was a gift from Allah. I suggested that though the water was free, the passenger who brought it had invested in a skin bag and had also invested his labour in bringing it to the bus with him. I don't remember the outcome; it had in any case been a purely academic discussion. I think it had a satisfactory end as the water was voluntarily passed around. The event planted the interesting thought in my already politically inclined mind, that while natural resources in their natural state are indeed the products of Nature rather than any human agency, the moment we add our labour to channel water or cultivate land, the results of that labour then become human property.

The bus made many involuntary stops along the journey to repair or patch-up various mechanical problems, a major event being a broken rear axle which happened when the bus left the narrow strip of tarmac at speed, digging itself down in the sand and ending up leaning heavily to one side. Several trucks passed by carrying various kind of merchandise from sealed crates to two decks of sheep. All stopped, offering such help as they were able, and none would proceed until all were able to go. Such was desert lore. After two hours we eventually took off. The bus would stop along the way at the odd, isolated mud building which served stew of some indeterminate meat and rice. Not a great attraction and better not even think of the source as one eyed the few stray dogs outside, but one had to eat something.

Eventually we reached Baghdad, hot, dusty and rather dirty. Feeling that, despite our near-zero budget, we were entitled to a touch of luxury, we checked into the Tigris Palace right on the river. But in fact it proved rather rundown compared to when it was new and the Top Hotel in town, and therefore correspondingly reasonable in price. Clearly new hotels had passed it by. We had planned to go on into Iran – I had always fancied Isfahan – but we'd had enough. A train ride took us down to Basrah and... home!

The family's Basrah bungalow was off the main road down a quite side street, with a veranda and a nice garden, flowers, bushes and two low date trees which made easy work of plucking soft ripe dates, warmed by the sun. After the revolutionary atmosphere of Beirut it seemed wonderful to be able to go into town (a short ride on the public bus) – we had several shopkeeper friends and the souk always offered an interesting stroll.

Where the Tigris and Euphrates join to form the Shatt-al-Arab, north of Basrah, that is the traditional location of the Garden of Eden. Father and Mother often drove up there with a picnic. It is a scenic spot, grass, palm trees, and the two great rivers joining.

Iraq had always seemed a very peaceful country. More laidback, almost countrified, than Syria and certainly more so than racy Lebanon. The King was on the Throne and all was well with the world. The large format, full colour magazine of the Iraq Petroleum Company always published some new development every month – a new school, irrigation project or highway – one had the impression that at least some, if not a major part of the oil revenues went into improving the lot of the Iraqi people.

The IPC played its part too, sending promising youngsters to England to train as engineers. But in July1958 all that came to an abrupt and violent end.

Most revolutions have at least a hint of justification – mainly that the present incumbent is corrupt, brutal and incompetent. The fact that revolution normally replaces one bad regime with another doesn't alter the fact that at least there is some supposed justification. In Iraq there was no such justification, simply a man by the name of Abdel Karim Kassem, a soldier who, being from a poor background, fancied the perks, privileges and prestige of Head of State.

It was known in the Palace that he was not to be trusted, and the Military Divisions loyal to him were always kept away from the Capital – except for this one occasion when Faisal's Divisions were exercising with King Hussein's on the borders with Jordan while Kassem's divisions found themselves near the Capital.

Suddenly Kassem awoke to the fact that a seemingly impossible dream cherished for twenty years could suddenly become reality. Bingo. He moved into the Palace slaughtered everyone in sight, then seized the Radio Station (of course) and announced to a startled Iraq and an equally startled world that the cruel imperialist regime had been overthrown by loyal Iraqis and that he, Brigadier General Abdel Karim Kassem would bring the prosperity of oil to all citizens.

Arabs always seemed, as they do now, ready for violence, and the whole country erupted. Certainly Basrah centre was to be kept away from for a while, even though – amazingly and mercifully – the English were not the target. From Baghdad came stories of bodies hanging from lamp-posts, and general, all-pervading violence. Fortunately it seemed to simmer down quite quickly. One thing I remember was the rapidity – almost overnight – with which the framed portraits of His Majesty King Faisal which hung loyally and prominently in every shop were replaced with pictures of Kassem.

So. Chaos reigned for a few days, then everyone settled back to see what would happen. The problem was, that although he had dreamed of revolution for twenty years, now that it had suddenly come upon him, Kassem had absolutely no idea what to do with it. He gave votes to women who would never dare use them (in fact they would never be given an occasion to vote about anything), closed Baghdad Racecourse on the grounds that it was corrupt (which everyone knew – you didn't bet on the horses, but on who you tipped to win in the rigged race). He told Iraqis that no one needed to work, and that the vast date plantations around Basrah need no longer be irrigated – so the trees all died. After that, the Great New Leader fell into a semi-trance.

Meanwhile the IPC execs had to learn to live with their new masters. Father was present at several routine meetings with Kassem. Executives of the Petroleum Company would have, or attempt to have policy meetings with him. The minutes of meetings would record a point made by IPC negotiators after which the President would remain silent for half an hour, gazing out of the window, then perhaps addressing an imaginary multitude. The Company and its staff took matters in hand, carrying on unmolested much as before.

Down in Basrah some of the Company Staff were Naughty. The local offices were in a two-story building, the bottom for Iraqi staff, clerks and messengers, the top floor for the British staff. One night in the hottest month of August, a few of the British staff let themselves into the building and stuck huge posters of Kassem in front of and blocking all of the air conditioning outlets. The ground floor Iraqi staff were sweltering in 120 degree heat, but of course no one would dare to take down the pictures of Our Great Leader. Naughty indeed.

We were told that our Great Leader would grace Basrah with his presence. The people put up triumphal arches of palm fronds on the roundabout at the outskirts of the city. Time passed and the palm fronds wilted then collapsed. The country joined its Leader in a political trance. Clearly this could not be tolerated for log, so his brother stepped in and killed him, thus becoming Iraq's second president.

He in turn was killed by a brother-in-law, and so it went on, each new President getting the job by murdering his predecessor – until Saddam Hussein, who by killing any and all individuals remotely suspected of disloyalty in his infamous ‘cinema trials’ and wiping out major sections of the population, managed to hold power for 34 years.

One of his major acts of genocide was against the Marsh Arabs, or Madan, who lived in the marshy area between the Tigris and the Euphrates as they gradually come together to merge as the Shatt-al-Arab. Massive government drainage schemes turned the region to a wasteland of cracked, salinated earth. We knew something of the Marsh Arabs after a lecture with slides given in K3 by Wilfred Thesiger, whose book The Marsh Arabs (now available in Penguin Classics) remains the definitive authority.

During the years he spent among the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq Thesiger came to understand, admire and share a way of life that had endured for many centuries. Travelling from village to village by canoe, he won acceptance by dispensing medicines and treating the sick. In this account of his time there he pays tribute to the hospitality, loyalty, courage and endurance of the people, describes their impressive reed houses, the waterways and lakes teeming with wildlife, the herding of buffalo and hunting of wild boar, moments of tragedy and moments of pure comedy, all in vivid, engaging detail. Untouched by the modern world until recently, these independent people, their way of life and their surroundings have suffered widespread destruction under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Saddam Hussein also waged a war of total destruction on the Kurdish people in the north of Iraq. Estimates of the numbers of Iraqi Kurds killed range from 50,000 from international human rights groups, to the Kurds' own figure of 182,000. Iraqi security forces destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages and displaced more than a million people.

Ultimately it was the infamous Iraq war of 2003 which put an end to the genocide and its chief perpetrator. As for Tony Blair and his now controversial support for the war to topple Saddam, he was not and had never come over as a warmonger. Indeed Blair pursued the Northern Ireland peace process around the clock. Why would someone allegedly indifferent to the bloody consequences of war work sleeplessly to secure peace? It is my own belief that Blair could no longer personally tolerate the continuing massacres of entire races and populations without intervening to stop the genocide. His was a war against genocide, taken to a degree he personally could no longer stand by and watch. I cannot look back and say that I opposed the Iraq war and Britain’s participation. I suppose I had dreams of Iraq returning to the Iraq I had once known, though of course this was never an option.

TEN: Sunni and Shia

For 30+ years under Saddam’s reign, his favoured Sunnis lived a life of ease. Nothing was denied them, even in times of scarcity. The Sunnis were and are a small minority living around Baghdad. The Shia majority, mainly inhabiting the South, were disenfranchised, deprived, dispossessed and brutally tortured, as indeed were the Kurds living in the North. The brutality of his regime was widely recognized, and was to give the USA an excuse to invade, particularly when Saddam proposed denominating his oil prices not in USD but in Russian Roubles – the unkindest cut of all A further excuse was provided, or manufactured, in the form of supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction.

During the buildup before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Hans Martin Blix, previously head of the International Atomic Energy Agency had been called back from retirement by UN Secretary General to lead United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission in charge of monitoring Iraq. I wrote to him suggesting that if there were weapons to be concealed, the underground tunnels, caverns and rivers beneath the area round K3 station which had been popular with pot-holers and 'underground' family picnics would be an ideal location. He replied personally, acknowledging with thanks.

But as we now know, nothing was found, and indeed in an interview on BBC1 on the 8th of February 2004, Blix accused the US and British governments of dramatizing the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, in order to strengthen the case for the 2003 war against the government of Saddam Hussein. Even after invasion and occupation, no stockpiled weapons of mass destruction were ever found. And in fact a subsequent Senate committee report would find that many of the administration's pre-war statements about Iraqi WMD were not supported by the underlying intelligence.

However, in his addresses to the American nation from the Oval Office, March 19, 2003, to announce the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, President George W. Bush declared *"The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder."*

The invasion of Iraq commenced on March 20, 2003, ostensibly to pre-empt deployment of the fabled Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction and remove Saddam from power. The Iraqi military was quickly defeated. The capital, Baghdad, fell on April 9, 2003. On May 1, 2003, President Bush celebrated the end of major combat operations in his "Mission Accomplished" speech. But the travails of my once-homeland were only just beginning.

With the fall of the Saddam regime at the hands of George Bush, and the loss of influence of Saddam's favoured Sunnis, it was quite understandable that the suppressed Shia majority would be lusting for power, and, in extremis, revenge against their previous Sunni masters. Iraq was a explosion waiting to happen. And America's imposition of Democracy lit the fuse.

The actuality of democracy belies its etymological roots. The word is derived from the Greek *kratos* meaning power, and *demos* meaning people – power to the people. But since all of the people are never united and of one mind, this ideal is clearly impossible. What democracy means in practice is rule not by the people, but by a majority of the people. This is Democracy's watchword: the Majority is Right. Never mind if it is oppressive of minorities, if it is irresponsible, if it creates debts which future generations must repay… if it's the Majority Will, that's Democracy, so it must be Right.

The American imposition of Democracy on Iraq at once gave overwhelming power to the Shia majority, people with 30+ years of repression to work out against the Sunni minority now fearing for their lives. The Kurds, having settled their internal divisions, quietly got on with their lives in the North, building what was to become a virtual nation with its own government, vibrant economy, and fairly stable borders which Baghdad would be powerless to question.

In the rest of Iraq, while Sunni and Shia sects had never previously been mutually antagonistic and indeed had inter-married and co-existed quite happily, now with the imposition of America's Universal Solution of Democracy, the Shia majority naturally took over the reins of government and tensions would boil over between the previously-repressed and now-dominant Shia majority, with their previous Sunni oppressors now a fearful minority. The outcome was, and still is, inter-religious civil war, except that now the black ISIS has joined to further complicate an already horrendous scenario.

The story continues, now in Syria, as various key locations and cities fall first to one side then the other, without any apparent end in sight. It started as a protest against what was perceived as an oppressive sectarian government. Would-be reformers were not to know that protest would end in total destruction.

We returned to England and started a record business.

ELEVEN: The Thomas Goff Jamboree

One of the early pleasures on returning to 'normality' was the rediscovery of baroque music. We were living at Walton on Thames, just 27 minutes on the train from Waterloo Station which was itself a few minutes' walk from the Royal Festival Hall – 'Festival' referring to the Festival of Britain, 1951. We were often tempted to go to the converts there, but hard reality advised otherwise. Fact was, that for two concert tickets one could by an LP, and whereas the convert was all over in two hours at most, an LP can give pleasure for ever, a Truth borne out by the fact that we are still enjoying some of those 1950s LPs seventy years later!

There were, however, one or two exceptions. Of great excitement in the musical world was the 'discovery' of Antonio and his enormous musical output, and concert-goers were presented with a season almost entirely devoted to the manifold and varied works of this newly discovered baroque master. The story of Vivaldi's 20th century rediscovery has its own drama with several tense moments for the key players.

But first, we return briefly to the Ospedale della Pieta, the 'school' for the daughters of Venetian Gentlemen and their extra-marital dalliances, where Antonio Vivaldi held a position of composer-in-residence and music tutor for most of his life. While we have ample information on Vivaldi's life and work there, we have no record of the school's later closure, and nothing now remains of the school's original building. One thing of which we may be certain: the last remaining priests would surely not wish to see their great collection of Vivaldi manuscripts and printed works separated and dissipated who knows where. Much better to try and preserve the collection intact. And where? Surely another religious institution would be a first thought.

The solution lay with a boarding school in Piedmont run by Salesian Fathers, who in the autumn of 1926 discovered in their archives a large amount of old music volumes. The Fathers referred to Dr. Alberto Gentili, professor of music history at Turin University. On opening the first crate he found before him volume upon volume of Vivaldi autographs. Proceeding with the utmost secrecy, Dr. Gentili went begging and finally succeeded in finding a public-spirited Turinese who would agree to purchase the collection and donate it to the Turin Library in memory of his deceased infant boy, and the Turin Library took possession of 97 volumes containing rare printed music, manuscripts and autographs not only of the works of Vivaldi, but of other composers of the 15, 16 and 17 hundreds.

The establishment of the Turin Collections led to the Vivaldi renaissance, marked by the Vivaldi week celebrated in Siena in September, 1939 and the projected issuance of the Complete Works of the great Venetian master. Alas, the war halted this promising start, and the entire project was put on hold. After the liberation of Italy, with publication by Casa Ricordi, the newly discovered Vivaldi items began to appear in publication and were soon heard in Italy, spreading throughout Europe. Thus the once famous then totally forgotten Antonio Vivaldi was elevated to his present status as *the* great Italian contemporary of Bach and Handel.

Another exception was the budget-price one-hour 6 o'clock organ recitals, for which organists would be invited from all over the world. And they came, too! All the big names! It was fun to see them in action: Helmut Walcha, totally blind with just an assistant to change the stops for him and to lead him on and off the stage. We couldn't see the hands, but we could see the action on the foot pedals which was equally entertaining.

Yet another occasion absolutely NOT to be missed was the "Thomas Goff Jamboree" held each year. This regular event featured harpsichords by the London builder 'Thomas Goff of Pont Street' as he was known. Four Goff harpsichords would be lined up on stage, with harpsichordists Thurston Dart, George Malcolm, Valda Aveling and others variously taking part year by year. The harpsichordists had enormous fun, bobbing and nodding between themselves while orchestra and conductor struggled to keep pace.

The repertoire always included Bach's Concertos for multiple harpsichords, with perhaps the CPE Bach for 2 harpsichords. Goff's instruments included 8-foot and 4-foot options, with quill and leather plectra, and a lute-stop (produced with a damping mechanism). They were also equipped with anything from 2 to 7 foot-pedals for use in making quick registration changes. Stops could also be "half drawn", allowing subtle changes of volume.

The popularity of these concerts produced two original compositions written specially for the occasion: a set of Variations on a Theme of Mozart for 4 harpsichords by George Malcolm, and a concerto for 4 harpsichords and strings by Thurston Dart after Vivaldi's opus 3/11 – emulating Bach's own BWV 1064 for 4 harpsichords after Vivaldi's opus 3/10.

Thomas Goff was distantly related to the Royal Family and was obviously fairly well-off. He lived in a huge red-brick terrace house at 46 Pont Street, near fashionable Sloane Square in London, with his butler who resided in the basement. The high Edwardian rooms on the ground floor of the house were full of his harpsichords, which he rarely sold, though he hired them out for concerts. Above that, the middle floors were often let – Lord Waldegrave and his family lived there at one time.

And then, right at the top, in two floors of attics, for the Pont Street houses are somewhat Dutch in design, he had his workshop scattered over several rooms. One room for himself, one for his cabinet maker, Cobby, one for passing helpers or students, one for polishing, one for storage.

Cobby – he was always called by his surname – was a genuine salaried highly-skilled craftsman of great experience who worked with Goff for many years. He did all the cabinet making, always insisting on only the highest standards of work. He could distinguish a true right-angle, 90°, from a corner of 89° or 91° with a touch of his finger and thumb. His instrument cases were always expertly made with great economy of time, effort and words.

Goff himself, though highly skilled as a cabinet-maker, generally concerned himself with the actions, stringing, tuning and voicing. Goff filled his house with musicians, many of whom came regularly to practice. He was not an adventurous maker, he made only three sorts of instrument – a large double-manual harpsichord with a metal frame, a small double-strung chromatic clavichord, and a very small single-strung chromatic clavichord. The decoration varied but not the instruments. Indeed he sought to maintain a high unvarying standard. And to do this he used, for example, a lot of metal templates in the construction. The smallest clavichords had a thin tone and few were made. The larger clavichords were very successful, sounded well and were made in some quantity; they had a pressure plate over the strings and a fairly thick piano-style soundboard barred straight across underneath. The harpsichords, made with pedals, were very complicated, all registers being capable of half as well as full engagement, but they produced relatively little volume for such large instruments

Brother and I, having by then launched ourselves into the recording business with a label specializing in the music of Bach and baroque, and with the presumptuousness of youth, wrote to Mr Goff telling him how much we admired his instruments. He invited us to visit him in his Pont Street chambers, where we discussed harpsichords and music generally accompanied by tea and toasted crumpets in front of a roaring log fire, most welcome on a cold foggy London day! He himself played very well, both technically and in the sense that he deeply "felt" the music he was playing; we still remember with affection a magical performance he gave us of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy.

TWELVE: Cucumbers and Toilet Rolls

In 1975 we took a 14-day Cooks Tour of the USSR. We flew to Moscow where we were met by a shy and charming lady called Alla who would accompany us throughout the tour which was to include Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tashkent and Samarkand. Magical names which didn't disappoint.

In Moscow we were taken through the Kremlin, treated to a concert in the great Hall of the Soviets, as well as having free time to wander at will. In Leningrad we went on a Hydrofoil trip up river to the Summer Palace 'Petrodvorets', also of course, through the Winter Palace – or rather a small part of this vast and rambling edifice, with all its art treasures.

One day we were joined by a group of High School girls who in order to improve their already fairly advanced grasp of English, acted as our guides. They were lively and vivacious, showing no signs of having been primed with dire warnings not to give away any vital information (whatever that might be) nor did they appear to have been schooled in the art of prying out of us such Sate Secrets to which we might have been party. It was all relaxed and friendly, a very pleasant interlude for both sides. We tended to 'pair off' and our own guide was older and perhaps more mature than the others.

As we were enjoying a turn in one of several parks, she launched into a discussion on Western Democracy. She seemed very well informed and wondered aloud how much *real* control citizens had over their government, whatever its colour. She had obviously given the whole concept of popular government a lot of thought and put forward some very interesting questions. For example, if The People had real power and could vote on any issue they chose, would ordinary people really choose to spend so much of *their* money on armaments? We thought probably not. So did she. But we agreed that no government, Socialist or Capitalist, would ever be likely to gives the choice!

Then to the airport, as we took the long flight by Aeroflot to Kiev. We boarded the plane before and separately from the Russian travellers, but once onboard we all sat mixed in together. I sat next to a charming lady in a voluminous fur coat (obviously a commissar's wife – or 'friend') who, on learning that I was from England, regaled me with what was probably the limit of her linguistic abilities: 'I like coffee, I like tea. I like boy, boy like meeeee!' Topped off with a wonderful smile. I felt a light tapping on... well somewhere on my person. It was the drip drip drip of raspberry juice from a now soggy paper bag on the woven string luggage rack above. Gasps of horror from my companion of course. Fortunately, believe it or not, it didn't show as the drops fell on the collar of my shirt which was dark blue.

Meanwhile lunch was being prepared in the kitchen. Yes, the kitchen. A large area of one side of the plane next to the cockpit was partitioned off to form a fully working kitchen. A large wide door between kitchen and main cabin was left wide open so the whole scene was visible and the progress of lunch could be monitored. Three generously proportioned ladies in white coats bustled about, the main activity being centered around a large cooker on which were two large pans, one containing chicken, the other, rice. Yes, appropriately enough considering our destination, we were to be served Chicken Kiev. And yes, *served* – on proper china plates with the Aeroflot badge, accompanied by real knives and forks and local wine. What a way to travel!

I digress for a moment, begging the Reader's pardon. But things happen when they happen.

Back in 1961 it appeared to some that there was a danger of political isolation for the United Kingdom within Western Europe if we didn't join the European Economic Community, then of six members states.We duly applied, but were turned down by French president de Gaulle in 1963 with a second application also vetoed by de Gaulle in 1967. Obviously the haughty President-General had already forgotten who liberated Paris for him. But in typical British style, this tiresome process produced an accompanying ditty:

Old de Gaulle is a merry old soul,
And up to all manner of tricks.
But despite what they say
On the Quai d'Orsay,
He can't count higher than six.

The Quai d'Orsay, as *you* know of course, though some may not, is France's Whitehall, the Seat of the nation's Administration. Britain was finally admitted on 1 January 1973 with Denmark and Ireland. This proved highly controversial and a referendum was held in 1975, when we ourselves were in Kiev. Our guide for that city had been fully informed of the issue, together our personal and very strong wish for a NO vote. When she rejoined us after her lunch break with the news of a 67% vote in favour of continued membership, it quite spoiled the rest of our day.

Kiev was a fine, clean city, little different from one of the better cities of equivalent size in the west. Though yes, there was one event which we wouldn't see in England. As we looked out of our hotel window before breakfast next day, we saw a few people gathering on the street corner by an empty glass kiosk. Then more, and more.

During the socialist days in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, no one would ever consider going out without a bag of some sort, either a string bag (advantage, it was compact to carry) or a canvas bag (advantage, people couldn't see what you had in it). The shops were normally empty. You'd go to a supermarket and be confronted by a huge pyramid of the latest harvest – say tins of Bulgarian tomatoes. But then go round on either side and the shelves would be totally empty. This was quite normal everywhere. But sometimes, and suddenly, a miracle would happen.

Returning after breakfast, we were fascinated to see that the now much larger crowd had formed an orderly line. What's going on? We could hardly leave the window! Finally our patience was 'rewarded' as a truck drew up and tipped a load of cucumbers onto the street. Meanwhile a man had appeared armed with a pair of weighing scales, setting himself up in the kiosk. The ladies presented themselves one by one, holding out their ubiquitous string bags for their ration of cucumbers. In what seemed like moments, the queue of people, the pile of cucumbers, the salesman and his scales were gone, the street corner was deserted once more. We saw the same thing in Leipzig on another trip 'east', when a similar truck appeared, shot a load of strawberries onto the pavement – some red, some green, all covered in mud. So much for fresh produce.

On another occasion, in the very dowdy main street of a small Polish town, we approached a book shop, selling books, magazines, newspapers, and, apparently, toilet paper (well it's paper, isn't it?). As we got nearer, an old lady came out, back bent, dressed all in black. She was beaming with joy, her wrinkled face looked as if it was smiling for the first time since it was created. Obviously the shop had just had a delivery, and she happened to be on hand for a bonanza. Round her neck was a huge necklace of toilet rolls threaded on a length of string, reaching almost to her ankles. 'At last – Relief,' we thought, with our English sense of humour. Indeed, relief she would enjoy for several months to come.

Back on our trans-USSR journey, in both Tashkent and Samarkand, we found that Soviet-style communism might not provide the luxuries of the West, but whereas we would normally expect peripheral regions to show declining prosperity and environmental standards, in the USSR they were given the same resources and attention as the rest of the Union. Both Tashkent and Samarkand as cities were clean and well-maintained, with reliable power and water, public transport (trams and buses), and a very definite feeling of not having been abandoned by civilization.

Other travel opportunities were to come our way.

We enjoyed our record company. It didn't make any money, but we enjoyed it, making our own recordings in the huge ballroom of our 1760s home, being creative in the field of baroque music which we loved. But classics are loss-leaders for big companies, giving them a touch of class and prestige.

Fortunately we had a very dear aunt who appeared fairly well endowed financially. She enjoyed travelling around Europe, and always had a favourite hotel in each of her favourite watering places where she was known and always made welcome. She would stay for fairly long stretches and as petit-point (as I think its called) was a favoured relaxation she would make chair covers with the hotel's name and some appropriate design. No doubt they are still being sat upon after, what, thirty years plus.

But the time came when she could no longer travel – the luggage (even though she always travelled amazingly light), the arrangements, and most importantly getting on and off continental trains with their doors three feet off the low platform.

Enter self and Brother with our new VW camper, we newly retired after selling our business. We would take her on trips around Europe, providing vehicle and all reservations, formalities etc, while she would provide food and lodging. It should be added that in the 1980s hotels, especially the small out-of-the way ones we all preferred, were totally and reasonably affordable. Try and find one now! Actually, unless you're financially loaded, don't bother.

So we toodled gently here and there, crossing and re-crossing from East to West, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia as it then was... Wherever.

Aunt D being a very keen, and very expert horsewoman, we took to dirt roads in Hungary to visit a small collective farm where they specialized in breeding horses. A modest thatched building with six rooms for guests. The price per person for bed and breakfast: £1.50. We went down to breakfast next morning. The restaurant was also a meeting place for the various workers, all most relaxed and friendly. We had excellent coffee and freshly baked bread. "Did we want eggs?' the good lady cook inquired. We said Yes Please and that was that. We sat and waited - perhaps they'd forgotten, or eggs were 'off' as happened so often in Eastern Europe. Eventually it came.

A plate a foot long bearing an equally long omelet stuffed with tomatoes, fried onions, read peppers... One could say a good start to the day! The way back to the main road in the direction we wee heading was unmarked, across open grassland. We proceeded at a leisurely pace following behind a donkey cart till we reached the main road.

On another occasion we accompanied her to the Driving Championships at Apeldoorn, Holland, where we were to sit for hours on hard benches watching horses and riders doing Amazing Things. Total boredom for two non-horsey people? On the contrary. Watching the same drills over and over by different national teams made us quite expert, checking keenly every move, every detail. Prince Philip was there too, adding a touch of home in a foreign land.

THIRTEEN: East Germany behind the Wall

During the 70s and early 80s we visited all the Socialist States, the last, East Germany, being in 1986.

Despite an amazing capacity to fool the West into thinking the DDR was a prosperous country, the truth, gradually worsening during the 80s, was a rapidly decreasing industrial productivity coupled with a total lack of foreign currency with which to update machinery and equipment. The textile industry was still labouring with pre-war machines; the once-proud legacy of historic buildings was in ruins, even new apartment blocks lacked the funds for necessary maintenance and cleaning.

Consumer goods became scarce, and the socialist Welfare State of health, rent, transport and arts subsidies could only be maintained through a heavy and increasing budget deficit. While the outer facade of confidence was maintained together with the *Stasi* spying and oppression apparatus, Honecker, the then Party Chairman retired into his own socialist dream world, appearing less and less in public.

The few, the very few tourists to East Germany during the early and mid-eighties were among a tiny minority who realized what West Germany would be undertaking when it proudly celebrated unification with the East.

No ordinary West German would ever dare go over to the East for fear of never returning. Most of those in the West who had relatives in the East would not visit them, for they had fled without permission and were therefore considered in the East as wanted criminals. And when the few West German dignitaries went over on State visits, of course they only saw the best the Socialist State could provide. As for foreign tourists, they were few indeed – hardly surprising given the clear lack of enthusiasm shown by the East German State Tourist Offices in the West.

Travelling through any of the Eastern Socialist countries during the 1970s and 80s could be a nail-biting adventure. Hungary was the most liberal and prosperous of the satellite States – though Bulgaria was quietly and fairly comfortably surviving on its agricultural base. Czechoslovakia was clearly falling behind economically even in the western, Czech area, while Slovakia had largely become a holiday destination for favoured Socialist workers from East Germany and the USSR. The Hotel Partizan at Tale in the Slovak Carpathian mountains was popular with East German workers on vacation, mostly walkers and hikers, dressed in knee length hiking breeches with long red stockings. At breakfast the waiters would bring out trays of brown paper packages from the kitchen containing packed lunches.

Travellers in the Eastern countries could go in organized groups or in their own western vehicles – the experienced always careful to be fully conversant with, and to follow the local rules to the letter, to enjoy the sights of cities, villages and countryside yet maintaining a low profile, avoiding authority where possible, and showing due respect whenever a confrontation was inevitable. Western "Capitalists", with their hard currency and apparent wealth and air of self-confidence, were universally, though privately, regarded as Superior Beings, and it was vitally important never to lord that superiority over one's less fortunate Socialist brethren.

But even before leaving one's Western homeland, it was clear that East Germany would be the most oppressive, the least welcoming of the European Socialist countries. To visit Hungary and Czechoslovakia you could get a visa, if you were willing to wait several hours, at the border. And in both cases, once you were there, you could more or less travel where you wanted. East Germany, however, required not only a visa in advance, but all hotels had to be pre-booked by the State Travel Agency for each and every night of your stay – so that in effect the Great State Machine could keep tabs on you. There was no choice of hotel – you stayed where you were put. Indeed a preferred itinerary might be altered because "there are no hotels available", effectively putting cities, or whole regions, "off the map". No, East Germany did not put out the welcome mat!

We drove across West Germany, enjoying as always its orderliness and comfortable – bordering on conspicuous – prosperity, its beautifully restored and maintained historic buildings, cathedrals and churches, its paved pedestrianized town centres served by clean modern tramcars, its low-key town bypass roads carefully integrated into the landscape, and its scenic orderly countryside of woods, hills and immaculate farms. Such was Kassel. our last port of call in the West.

When we presented ourselves at one of the few permitted border crossings, the West German border guard was quite amazed that anyone from the West would willingly go over to the East – and for tourism?? He wished us "safe journey" in a tone which seemed to say "watch your step and come back alive!" We left the informal West German border post and drove through a no-man's land, through the Iron-Curtain of barbed wire and forbidding watch-towers to the Eastern side where we and our vehicle were thoroughly and suspiciously scrutinized by grim border guards.

As we drove the short distance towards Eisenach in East Germany our hearts began to sink as the dismal socialist scene gradually unfolded before us. The main road leading into the town was of prewar cobbles, full of potholes, the road edges overgrown and untidy, with rusted and leaning street lights many with their light fittings missing.

Eisenach itself presented a scene straight from the aftermath of World War II. The buildings were crumbling, the dusty, dirty and long-unpainted facades almost obscured by a thick pall of sulfurous coal-smoke, and the blue fumes from the 2-stoke cars which, incidentally were only for model workers after a wait of up to 21 years. The yellow coal smoke, we later learned, was produced by the ubiquitous yellow-dust coal briquettes which seemed to be the only form of domestic heating fuel. It came from enormous open-cast mines which in their relentless expansion had consumed whole villages.

All the buildings were dirty and grimy, the streets and pavements in disrepair, the few shops dowdy, and small crowds of people seemed to be standing around on street corners as if with nothing to do. In the back streets whole blocks of houses were simply falling down, some boarded up, some lying as piles of rubble which nature was already camouflaging with grass and small bushes. To call our reaction "a culture shock" after West Germany would be a totally inadequate description, despite our familiarity with other East European countries.

We were driving a very smart (even by Western standards) Toyota minivan, silver with dark blue interior and a huge sliding glass “moon roof”. We didn’t dare lean out of the window and ask one of the workers, just let out of their factories at 4pm and standing rather desolately on the pavement, where our hotel was. So we parked in a side street, walked a bit, then we asked.

Finding our hotel, we drove up to the entrance and presented our documents. The receptionist asked accusingly if *that* was our vehicle. When we owned up she appeared quite horrified, and informed us in no uncertain terms that the spaces in front of the hotel were for staff and “special guests” (read Party Members) and we could jolly well go and park in the street. Not a very propitious beginning!

There was, however a major consolation for us as totally dedicated Bach fans: the Bach-Haus, where Bach was born. Well probably not exactly, but of the same period and similar.We walked up a slight hill and found the Bach-Haus on our left, in front of us, a wall of greenery and a bust of Himself. The Haus itself was somehow very romantic, slightly wanting for maintenance yet dignified, aware of its role. A large tree spread its branches high above the path. Peaceful, timeless. Now ‘wessified’, the road has been bashed straight through the wall of trees, destroying the sense of ‘special place’, and a grotesque glass-walled ‘extension’ added to the old Bach-Haus, its tree now chopped down. Totally out of character, and tasteless in the extreme.

But back to socialism. The Bach-Haus had been nicely maintained inside, giving the feeling of, well, going back a couple of hundred years. The bottle-glass pained windows shut out the modern detail of its surroundings. There seemed to be several ladies involved in the running, all concealing their excitement at the arrival of two Wessies. Of course the small entrance fee had to be paid in West Marks, and after spending some time looking around and chatting with the ladies, one was brazen enough to ask discretely if we wanted to change any money... In fact for every West Mark we could have pushed for at least five of their Ost Marks but one just knew that doing so would be very hurtful to their pride. East Germans were fully aware of their degraded environment, and like every good German, they longed for the clean, neat and orderly environment that was their natural heritage and tradition, and they were ashamed that a Westerner should see the state things were in. So we maintained the fiction: one West Mark for one East Mark.

A group of students arrived and we were all treated to a concert of chamber music and a recital on the small organ, for which one of the staff would appear to work the hand pump. It was Brother’s birthday, and we bought the LP featuring a concert similar to the one we had just heard, and a picture of the internal garden on the front. We appended the two entrance tickets to the inner record sleeve, a memento we have to this day.

Also as part of the Birthday Celebrations, we drove to Gotha, a small (relatively!) but delightful castle/residence with a tiny theatre - perhaps holding 200 or so. Travelling often presents a lucky hit, or an unlucky miss (something truly fascinating happened the day before your arrival, or would happen the day after you’ve gone). In this case, we were lucky: a small ensemble giving a Bach concert. The combination of a very historic (1700s) theatre, our proximity to the stage, and our Absolute Favourite composer provided a wonderful birthday celebration.

However, that being socialist East Germany, there were a couple of black spots, the first literally black. Walking along one of the castle’s main passageways, bordered with elegant rooms many appropriately furnished, we passed one which was – believe it – full of coal. Presumably a year’s allocation had suddenly arrived and was shot through the nearest window. Such an insult to such a beautiful, historic building... we felt real pain. Clearly the staff felt the same sense of insult, and attempted to relieve it with humour. On the door was a large hand-written sign: Institut für Kohleforschung – Institute for Coal Research. It somehow stuck in the memory.

The other darker memory was of being halted by a police car. We were on a minor road and had in fact gone straight across a major road without stopping. Guilty as found. And not only that, we were Westerners, all of whom are presumed arrogant, and callously dismissive of local rules. Were we drunk, or just didn't care, or maybe both? He appeared quite angry, sensing some kind of political insult. Not at all, I assured the officer. We are always respectful of road rules especially in foreign countries. I as driver began by going, figuratively, on bended knee, assuring the policeman of our respect for local rules, and we simply hadn't realized what we had done. (Needless to say, there was not another car anywhere around.) "Aber es steht ein grosses Schild..." – but there is a huge sign, he remonstrated. Indeed there may have been but, as I then mentioned very cautiously, there was no lighting anywhere and it was a very dark night. Fact was that not one single one of the street lamps lining both roads was functioning – hardly uncommon in the DDR. We had driven over the main road without even realizing it.

I think he appreciated, both our genuine predicament, as well as our respect for the law. He also looked back and could see that the Great Sign was in total darkness. He softened, but was reluctant to show it. Where are you going? He wanted to know. We told him where we were staying, what a wonderful concert we had just enjoyed, and, coming in for the kill, that is was Brother's birthday. We told him we were on a music study tour, and how kind and helpful everyone was (very true, with only the odd exception). He asked to see my driving licence, partly as a final sign of authority, and probably out of curiosity. That completed, he saluted and wished us a pleasant stay. It was one of those events which would provide a useful anecdote later, but not so much fun at the time.

The more we travelled through East Germany, the more evidence we saw of a country close to economic breakdown. The roads were all full of holes – though there was little traffic even on main roads, for private motorists could not travel outside their towns without a permit. The air was polluted everywhere, even in the forest where we had thought we might enjoy a brief refreshment with nature. The few relatively modern industries belched out clouds of polluted gases while the many older factories seemed to be surviving in partly ruined premises. Urban streets were everywhere in decay and not a touch of paint had been put on the former private houses, each now assigned to several families, since before the War.

Our flashy motor vehicle attracted much attention, but never openly – German pride once again. But when we were breakfasted, packed and ready to go, we always saw many marks where noses had been pressed to the windows. We also attracted the more active attention of small boys, who, again under cover of darkness, removed the GB stickers from our vehicle. We were once reprimanded by a police officer for not displaying one; we told him we had replaced it no less than four times and the supply was now exhausted. He smiled. "A few small boys will be very proud" he commented, obviously a father himself.

We had requested that our itinerary should include Halle, the town of Handel's birth. But no. Believe it or not, Halle, a large and economically significant city, has "no hotels". So we were channelled to Wittenberg. Wittenberg? What ever for? Who ever heard of it? Initial views as we drove into this rather drab city confirmed our doubts. Until we came across the church where Martin Luther had preached, and nailed his 95 Theses on the door, thus marking the beginnings of the Reformation in Germany. Later on the tour we visited the great hilltop Wartburg Castle, one of Germany's major historical attractions, where Martin Luther was holed up disguised as Juncker Georg, afraid of persecution by the anti-Reform Establishment. There he translated the whole New Testament into most beautiful and inspiring German in the space of four months over winter, secretly closeted in a small room with a bed, a desk, a chair, a large tiled stove which his one servant kept ever hot, and a fabulous view.

We had a sunny day for our Luther Visit in Wittenberg, so after a morning of Luther-study, we walked the short distance out of town to the banks of the Elbe River – the great artery which is to East Germany what the Rhine is to the West. We sat down at the edge of a field a few yards from the river, looking across to the opposite bank where there was a large and active Russian airforce base. After a few moments we became aware of an overwhelmingly foul odour. Surprised, we got up and looked closely at the river.

The water was thick and black, its surface solid with pollution of every kind imaginable, glistening multicoloured globules of oily petroleum products, lumps of industrial waste, yellowish foam, solid human effluent and domestic garbage. Following the universal instructions on fireworks – we retired immediately! Simple fact: environmental protection was a luxury East Germany could not afford, and didn't even care about.

We later learned, post-unification, that the Russian air base had been virtually inactive for many years. They were required to make several sorties each day, to keep the pilots in training, and to impress the fact of their presence on the local inhabitants – as well, presumably, as western monitors. Problem was that Socialist Planning was apparently unable to supply the many spare parts needed, and virtually all their planes were permanently grounded. For the Russian pilots, this was no problem, there was a plentiful supply of liquor, both commercial and home-made. But the State Machine was apparently quite able to keep them well supplied with fuel of which they soon had way more than they could store. The simple solution was to pump it into the ground, which, on Unification, had become totally saturated.

As a result of massive unrest during the mid- and late-1970s, the regime had embarked in the early 80s on a programme of social spending "whatever the cost". But there was no productivity-gain to support it. On the contrary, East German productivity lost ground rapidly, exports declined to a trickle, and there was no capital or foreign exchange with which to purchase much-needed new equipment.

It was also during this decade that East Germany's relative economic decline became physically apparent – to those who could see it. But the country's economic statistics were so cleverly manufactured and manipulated, that the West believed the fiction of East Germany as a highly industrialized and productive economy, placed between seventh and eighth in the world prosperity league.

In Naumburg we particularly wanted to visit the Cathedral which contained a large historic organ, completed in 1747 by Zacharias Hildebrandt, and on its completion it had been officially tested and certificated by none other than J.S. Bach himself. The Cathedral was at least sound in structure, though somewhat bare inside.

An elderly lady was sitting at a table inside selling postcards and a potted history leaflet. We told her of our interest in the organ and commented briefly on the bare interior. She said (and this was in 1985) that a complete refurbishment was in the State Plan for 1991. We said politely "that would be nice". She replied with some feeling that she hoped she wouldn't be still alive by then. There could hardly have been a more poignant comment on how ordinary people saw their future under Moscow's and Honecker's Socialist regime.

In this drab, postwar atmosphere only the Party bosses could obtain any of the luxuries which in the West were routine supermarket purchases. Special little shops throughout East Germany, coyly named "*Delikat*", or "*Exquisite*", displayed in their windows such provocative items as Palmolive soaps, Nescafé instant coffee, western toothpaste and washing powders, and Swiss chocolate, all of which and much more in similar vein was to be had only by the favoured few – and strictly in exchange for West German Marks of course.

For the ordinary people, there was little to brighten up their drab lives; music was one of their few joys, and for every musical event, long lineups would form several hours beforehand. Another treat was a visit to one of the cafes, where one would always, always have not one but two cakes.

In Weimar we were scheduled to stay at the once prestigious (and now prestigious again) Elephant Hotel. One memory is of self and Brother in our hotel room, the door securely locked, watching, not just the forbidden Western television, but, horror of horrors, a western-produced film about an East German family who famously escaped in a basked borne aloft and over the border by a hot air balloon. A true story in fact. We followed their preparations as they surreptitiously bought lengths of cloth, not only when and where it was available (both rare) but also not too much a time, so as not to arouse the suspicion of shopkeepers trained to be suspicious. It ended in triumph as the family landed in the West, but that happy ending was not won without many tense moments, both for the family... and for us!

In Leipzig we re-discovered what we could of the much-changed Leipzig of Bach's day, difficult even with a map in hand of Leipzig in 1750. Two highlights of our Leipzig visit remain memorable. One was an organ recital by Matthias Eisenberg in the Gewandhaus, the Regime's gift to culture. It was one of a series featuring Handel's organ music, which let's face it, is pretty thin and hardly soul-stirring. This was the last of the short series, and culminated with an improvisation on themes of Handel. Eisenberg was already established as an accomplished improviser, and on that occasion he must surely have excelled himself. The improvisation just went on and on, building ever higher, drawing in ever more Handellian themes, while the fascination and the tension among the audience became as electrifying as the performance itself. The memory would linger long after.

The other memorable highlight was a concert in the Thomaner Kirche by a visiting American choir – surely a very great rarity in those socialist days. The church was way more than full. We were literally packed like sardines. It wasn't just the music. Having a visit from The West was, to put it perhaps a little strongly but hardly inaccurately, like a prisoner receiving a rare visitor. The atmosphere was highly charged emotionally – one really felt it.

Sitting next to me was a young radio Czech engineer. He clung to my arm through the performance, actually doing slight damage to my sweater! He was in tears at the end. Germans are not normally given to applaud in church. But at the end someone started, and the whole church echoed with near-deafening applause. We were totally moved. Unlike James Bond, shaken *and* stirred. Another memory to linger.

As we travelled around East Germany in 1985, we sensed the total submission and defeat of the people, contrasting with the equally total confidence of the System and its rulers. Red wall banners were to be seen everywhere exhorting the populace – the same shade of red, the same typeface which we had seen in all the other socialist countries. Signboards with the same slogan also abounded.

The slogan of the moment was *Hohe Leistungen zum Wohle des Volkes und für den Frieden.* – "High achievements for the wellbeing of the people and for Peace". *Vorwärts zum XI Parteitag der SED!* – "Forward to the Eleventh Party Congress of the German Socialist Unity Party!" We could never have believed then, in 1985, that just four years later as the Twelth Party Conference approached, the whole edifice would collapse, its false front of self-confidence demasked, its lies laid open for the world to see. Indeed, it would be at that very Twelfth Party Conference, scheduled for the following year, 1986, that Gorbachev would preach *Perestroika*. Ultimately it would be simple economic reality which caused the Socialist State's undoing. By the end of the 1980s East Germany was in a state of physical collapse and financial bankruptcy.

On the way back we travelled through France and Belgium. We regularly tuned in to the local radio stations, to enjoy local news and especially any local folk music. One radio station we came across was Radio Vesuvio, but pronounced by their lady announcers longingly and lovingly – almost tearfully: Raaadio Vesuuuvio. This turned out to be the radio station of Polish exiles, fugitives from the Socialist Regime, "Vesuvio" in fact being a reference to Warsaw, or Varsovie in French.

FOURTEEN: The End of an Empire

Mikhail Gorbachev was the first Russian leader to distinguish fact from fiction, and to accept reality over ideology. Soviet-style central planning was not working, the USSR was way behind the West, and what was needed was a total rethink and reorganization, a concept given the Russian title of *Perestroika*. With hindsight it can be seen that even Gorbachev's vision was severely blinkered. What he advocated was a change in the system, a loosening of the rules, more private enterprise within the existing Socialist framework. Never once did he consider the possibility of the USSR breaking up.

Nor did he even appear to consider that the European satellite countries would want to break away. "More independence, but still within our Socialist family" was his vision, opening up to the West indeed, but not joining it and abandoning Socialism and the Soviet Union, the mother country. As the decade of the 80s drew to a close, Gorbachev toured the European Socialist countries, often witnessing the new wave of uprisings in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, preaching *perestroika*, inviting them to become more independent, more liberal, assuring them that this time, Russian tanks would not be rolling in.

Cautiously these countries began to move. Hungary's government declared that the barbed wire Iron Curtain between themselves and Austria had decayed to the point of becoming a danger to the public, and must either be removed, or replaced at enormous expense, which neither Hungary nor Russia could afford. Quietly, Hungarian border guards simply rolled up the barbed wire and disposed of it.

Meanwhile Lech Welensa was leading Poland towards democracy, while Czechoslovakia would have its "Velvet Revolution" inspired and led by the unassuming poet-writer Vaclav Havel. But East Germany, or rather, Erich Honecker, would have none of it.

The story moves now into 1989, and its two most critical, historical and momentous months of October and November in which events moved rapidly, almost day by day.

Erich Honecker, quite oblivious of the rapid liberalization which was going on in the socialist world around him, pressed blindly ahead with the great 40th Anniversary celebrations of the Founding of the DDR on October 7th 1989 with full military and ceremonial parades. But the regime's aggressive 40th Anniversary celebrations provided a focal point for massive demonstrations in major cities including East Berlin and especially in Leipzig where more than 70,000 demonstrators took to the streets.

Honecker held firmly to the Socialist course, yielding not an inch towards reform, liberalization, democracy, or the relaxation of the State's control. But events were to overtake, indeed overwhelm him, and 12 days later, on October 18th the Party "released" him from his duties, replacing him with his heir-apparent, but more pragmatic Egon Krenz.

Leipzig particularly was to play a major role in pressurizing for reform and liberalization. Since May 1989 the Monday Prayers in Leipzig's Nikolaikirche, which we had visited during our stay in Leipzig, had been a regular event, despite increasing police pressure in the form of road blocks, identity checks and general, often brutal harassment. The church's Pastor recalled the events of October 1989 in a leaflet published after Unification.

"The 9th of October 1989 was the decisive day. Crowds overflowed from the church for the evening prayer meeting, filling the 2,000 seats and standing in the aisles and galleries. Moreover, some 1,000 SED Party members had been ordered to go to the Nicolaikirche to reinforce the Stasi (State Security). The stage seemed set for confrontation, quite possibly a violent one.

"Something, however, had not been included in the plans: these persons were also exposed to the Word, the Gospel and its impact! I always regarded the fact that countless members of the Stasi heard the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, Monday after Monday, as something positive. Where else would they hear these? Thus it was that these people, Stasi and SED Party members, heard Jesus Christ's Gospel, which they didn't know, in a church where they were out of their depth.

"In the event the Prayers for Peace took place in unbelievable calm and concentration. Shortly before the end, appeals by Professor Kurt Masur, chief conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and others who supported our call for non-violence, were read out. Then the bishop gave his blessing, repeating his call for non-violence. And as we – more than 2,000 persons – came out of the church – I'll never forget the sight – tens of thousands were waiting outside in the Square. They all had candles in their hands. If you carry a candle, you need two hands. You have to prevent the candle from going out. You cannot hold a stone or a club in your hand.

"And the miracle came to pass. Jesus' spirit of non-violence seized the masses and became a material, peaceful power. Troops, industrial militia groups and the police were drawn in, became engaged in conversations. Then they withdrew. It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no victors or vanquished, no-one triumphed over the other, no one lost face. There was just a tremendous feeling of relief. Somehow, everyone seemed to know that it was only a matter of time before their world would be changed."

Following Honecker's replacement by the Party on October 18th, his successor, Egon Krenz, proclaimed on East German television that "the rebuilding of socialism in the Democratic Republic remains our goal, one that we can, and will fulfill by ourselves without any outside help". However, nine days later on October 27th Krenz received a "secret report", the *Geheimpapier,* prepared by the Senior Department of the Stasi, Department HV III, *Sicherung der Volkswirtschaft* – "Security of the People's Economy". It described in full and uncensored detail the true and disastrous condition of the nation's infrastructure, economy and finances.

On November 1st Krenz went to Moscow and laid the cards on the table. Without several billions of credit from the West, the East German economic situation could no longer be concealed. A reduction of East Germans' (already low) living standards by 30% would be needed and was politically unthinkable. Growth was negative, the current Five-Year Plan unfulfillable. Massive uncontrollable demonstrations continued with waves of refugees fleeing the country.

The Central Committee, the Interior Ministry and the *Stasi* hurriedly put together a face-saving package detailing orderly, controlled conditions on which citizens could travel outside the DDR. But that was not how it happened in practice, for the announcement was left in the hands of Minister of Propaganda, Gunter Schabowski who had just returned from vacation and was unaware of the extent of the demonstrations and the refugee situation.

At 6pm on November 9th Schabowski held a Press Conference at the Mohrenstrasse Press Centre, with the usual long drawn-out speech on Party Policy. Shortly before 7pm Schabowski was asked about travel regulations. After a moment's thought he pulled out a scrap of paper from his pocket which Krenz had previously given him and replied: "Yes, some action has already been taken. So far as I know, a decision was taken today. I believe… you already know about that…? No? Oh, I'm sorry. Then I will inform you about it." Schabowski read the note slowly, giving the headlines of the new regulations. Asked when they would come into force, he replied: "As far as I know… is it immediate? – yes at once…" Thus the flight known as *Die Nacht ohne Grenzen* – "Night without Borders" was unleashed.

Unable to believe their ears at first, people soon began massing at the crossing crossings until tens of thousands of people were crowded at the checkpoints demanding free passage, overwhelming border guards with their sheer numbers. The guards were unclear as to their orders, and attempts to contact anyone in authority within the Party failed. Unwilling to open fire on the crowds the guards simply gave in and yielded, opening the access points and allowing people through with little or no identity verification checks. Ecstatic East Berliners were soon greeted by jubilant West Berliners on the other side in a celebratory, party atmosphere.

On November 14th Egon Krenz sat visibly nervous on the podium of the East German parliament, the *Plenarsaal,* and ministers shuffled uncomfortably as the Finance Minister, Ernst Hofner, revealed the full economic truth for the first time. He spoke of years of concealment and fabrication, falsification of facts and figures, and accepted blame himself admitting that these economic reports had been handed down "from above" and that he had published them knowing that they were false, but not having the courage to speak out. The facts were brutal. East Germany's debts amounted to 130 Billion East German Marks. The country's industrial capital and infrastructure were in ruins following years of non-investment and neglect. The country needed massive investment loans from the West if was to continue to function at all, but this was impossible, for the existing external debt of 50 Billion West Marks already required servicing and repayments which could only be financed by new borrowing.

This speech was made in front of rolling cameras of the DDR television. East Germans who saw it were probably more aware of their country's condition than their leaders had been, but that was not the point. The point was that at last the nation's leaders were openly admitting their collective failure, and the ruinous condition to which they had reduced their country.

Meanwhile, jubilant crowds were making a mockery of the once-powerful Wall. Champagne corks were popping as citizens from East and West joined hands, sitting astride the wall, while others began chipping away at it with sledge hammers. Within a week of the "Night without Borders", nine million had fled East Germany for the West.

FIFTEEN: Unification and Disillusion

In March 1990, in preparation for full unification, the East German cabinet valued its nation's industrial capital at 1,400 Billion East Marks. The *Treuhand* – the Resolution Trust which took over the DDR's State-owned business and industry to privatize it, ended up, not with a 1,400 billion credit, but with a 210 billion Mark *deficit.*

Over 90% of all industrial effluent went untreated into rivers and streams. Underground sewage and water pipes were broken, allowing the contents to mix with clearly dire results: pure drinking water was an exception. Air pollution levels far exceeded any known norms.

Roads and services were breaking up, much of the housing stock was officially uninhabitable. The industrial base was virtually worthless.

The following year, after Unification, on October 3rd 1990, Germany got to work. It seemed as if every road had been dug up, then resurfaced after new water pipes, gas mains, sewer pipes, and fiber-optic phone lines had been laid. Urban streets were newly cobbled, with smartly designed public lighting fixtures. New industrial estates and shopping malls sprang up on the outskirts of every town. The old uniform socialist apartment blocks were modernized and refurbished, their exteriors freshly painted.

We went back, pretty much along the same route, six years later. Even then we found it difficult, often impossible to follow our chosen route, thwarted so often by the ubiquitous sign Umleitung: Diversion, as the long process of upgrading and modernization dragged on. Interesting were the many encounters with people we had met on our previous visit, now able to talk freely.

When unification happened, two names came into the German vocabulary: Ossies and Wessies, for East and West Germans. The Ossies saw the Wessies as brash, arrogant, disgustingly rich, without any sense of value. And how else? It seems that a sense of value and appreciation come only through deprivation, something the Wessies had no knowledge of.

The Wessies, for their part, looked with disdain at the East's dilapidation and decay. "OK, they're poor. But at least they can give their houses a coat of paint." But people we spoke to in 1996 told us that if anyone acquired so much as a length of timber to do a modest repair, let alone a can of paint, neighbours would cross the road to avoid them. Why? Because anyone so favoured must have become an Informer.

Of course a major grudge which many Wessies held against the "idle Ossies" was the 6% Reconstruction Tax imposed on the Wessies to rebuild the East.

The many Ossies we spoke to, regretted the "new spirit" of go-getting capitalism. Gone was the old camaraderie, the mutual help between neighbours, the cheap tram rides and almost-free concerts. Now it was all "money, money, money". And with unemployment rife, people began to lock their garden gates. Gone was the guaranteed job. Education, healthcare and pensions were there of course, but Germans are, perhaps more than other races, hard workers, and unemployment was a disgrace.

So. 1990 and the two Germanys, East and West, Capitalist and Socialist, were unified. At least officially anyway. But culturally and emotionally? No, not really. Not then, not six years later when we went back, not when Germany celebrated Ten Years of Unification, not when it became 20 years. Why this great divide? Will it never fade into a true integration?

In fifty years after the War's end, West Germany created a shining example of sky's-the-limit free enterprise, the economy boomed, millionaires were created, Mercedes and BMWs competed on Germany's no-speed-limit *autobahnen*. And citizens were spared the centralized planning and totalitarian control.

In that same period East Germany attempted to curb the excesses of natural human greed by creating an egalitarian state where everyone had a guaranteed job, a home, education, art, music, culture and all the other gifts of Socialism. But excessive central control eliminated the spirit of free human creativity without which no civilization can progress. And the lack of visible economic improvement led to unrest and with it the growth of suppression.

Unification was in practice a “Wessification” of the East. Many younger Ossies are fleeing their jobless communities, while the older people still remaining in the now de-populating East, continue to feel that despite their material gains, something intangible has been lost.

Now we find, not unification, but separation, as in 2015 Britain votes to leave the European Union. The turnout was high at 72%, with more people turning out to vote than in the previous year’s general election. Over 30 million people voted. London, Scotland and Northern Ireland were the only areas that voted to Remain in the referendum. Many reasons/excuses have since been offered, perhaps the most frequent offering being immigration. My own view looks to a deeper, more subtle motivation.

There are things in our lives, traditions, principles, ideals, which are so basic and fundamental we take them for granted and rarely give them a passing thought. Take for example the *Presumption of Innocence*. It is one of the foundation stones of justice throughout the world. Though not always practiced, it is at least universally recognized.

There are other principles and ideals, also basic and fundamental, which we unquestioningly accept, but so deeply ingrained are they in the very fabric of our lives, we don’t even realize they exist. We simply take them for granted like breathing. An example is the *Presumption of Liberty*.

The Presumption of Liberty is the presumption that we are all basically free to do whatever we like, to improve our lifestyle, our wellbeing, our employment and opportunities for advancement. The only qualification, the only legal prohibition, is that whatever we do, we should not in the process harm or endanger others, individuals or the collectivity.

The idea is well summarized by Lord Denning, an outstanding figure in British justice, in his book *The Family Story*: “Each man should be free to develop his own personality to the full; the only restrictions upon this freedom should be those which are necessary to enable everyone else to do the same”.

Applied in government, the principle is clear and simple. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, in his inaugural address to Congress as President in 1801: “a wise government shall restrain men from injuring one another, yet leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement.”.

Reading this in Britain, most Commonwealth countries or the USA, one might say... Well yes. It’s nice to be reminded from time to time. But it’s all quite obvious.

It may be quite obvious to citizens of Britain, the Commonwealth or USA, but it is by no means obvious to citizens of Europe. Indeed quite the contrary.

Throughout continental Europe the prevailing principle is a Presumption of *Regulation*. Regulation should be universal, and minutely detailed. There are those actions which are forbidden and those which are obligatory. Ideally there should be nothing in between, no room for doubt or uncertainty. A Swiss jurist once commented only partially in jest: “Everything in Switzerland is forbidden, except that which is obligatory”. In Europe, regulation prevails.

The Anglo view is that Liberty prevails; and any law which restricts our liberty must be openly justified on the grounds that it is harmful to others or to the collectivity.

That inherent conflict of view, largely unspoken but instinctively felt, was in my view the impetus behind the LEAVE vote. There are those who say we will regret it economically. One hopes not. But we must never regret it politically.

SIXTEEN: Are we winning? Don't ask

As past recollections move inevitably into the present, one is left wondering, to use a well-worn phrase, where will it all end? It's not just moi being pessimistic. Most people of a Certain Age whom I talk to say the same: we're glad we're not young. Yes, really. In happier times no one would think of saying such a thing. But these are not happy times. The world is not getting better – not by any stretch of the imagination. Fortunately for us Golden Oldies, it's the younger upcoming generations who will have to face these and similar challenges. But we can't say we're leaving them a good legacy.

When we were young, Brother and I planned to go one day to the southern tip of Africa and travel all the way up to Port Said by train. It was almost looking possible then. That's just not on any more. We used to holiday in Morocco and Tunisia; you can do that now if you're willing to risk death at the hands of a terrorist. Egypt's out, Lebanon's dodgy and under threat of being overwhelmed by refugees from self-inflicted and self-destructive civil war in Syria. And Iraq's no holiday camp either. Even Turkey under Erdogan is now abandoning any pretence of freedom and democracy as hundreds of convicted criminals are let loose from jails to make room for suspected dissidents incarcerated without trial on the flimsiest of evidence.

The European Union, once a great new ideal of unity and plenty, is a shambles, any semblance of democracy totally absent, governed as it is by anonymous civil servants issuing decrees by the hundred from behind closed doors in Brussels. Suppose the Founding Fathers of America were to forgather up there in the heavens, with the idea to look down upon the 'new United States': surely, they would think, Europe must have learned from and improved upon the US experience, surely the new United States of Europe will be an inspiration, a beacon of open, democratic, constitutional governance...

But no. Not a hope. They'll be thoroughly disillusioned. Come to think of it, they won't be any happier with their own United States, with its deadlocked Congress and its total disregard for its own constitutional principles. What about 'To no one will we sell, to no one will we deny, or delay right or justice?' Tell that to the men in Guantanamo Bay detention camp, languishing there for ten years plus without trial or even substantiated accusation.

Meanwhile we doggedly pursue our animal/human instinct to find an enemy somewhere, anywhere. It was Merkel's idea to put sanctions on Russia and it has only made the world a worse, more dangerous place to live. If there's a war in thirty years' time – for which I, mercifully will not be around – who knows, we may find ourselves uniting with Russia in a necessary semblance of European, indeed Western unity in the face of aggressive Chinese expansion both financial and geopolitical.

Apart from the occasional 'Free Tibet' bumper sticker the world has conveniently forgotten a growing China's initial gesture to the world in the form of its brutal and totally unjustified occupation of defenceless Tibet, the horrendous details of which I learned about from my sister who was secretary of the London Buddhist Society, founded by Christmas Humphreys, QC, and which adopted several Monks who had managed to escape the terrors and torture of the Chinese invasion. China has since seized various offshore islands and invented others with no regard to any counter-claims nor indeed for the decisions of international courts.

Though a 'real' war of mutual physical destruction with China may always remain a possibility, there is another, on-going war with China right under our very noses, and China's winning hands down. *What??*

Take a few steps back in time. China was incredibly poor. Its progress, if 'progress' is the right word for 'two steps forward, one step back' to quote Mao Tstetung, was slow and painful. We followed it from the 50s onwards via China Reconstructs and China Pictorial. But gradually, with the advent of more capitalism-inclined governments, things began to change, and China developed a huge capacity for manufacturing, clothing, pots and pans, many of the high-labour products in common use throughout the West.

Illiterate, penniless peasants were tempted into the big-city factories where they would work for what would be a pittance to us, but a fortune to them, living in dormitories with ultra-basic washing, toilet and laundry facilities, fed in canteens, with leave to go home once every twelve months for Chinese New Year. In factories such as these in major cities across China, basic household and personal requirements were being churned out in fairly acceptable (and gradually improving) quality at prices factories in the West could never hope to match. For us in the West it was a windfall. And it gave an enormous boost to China's own prosperity of course. But there's more.

The Chinese government and its Central Bank maintained strict control over the dollar-yuan rate. China's goods were so cheap relative to Western equivalents that the Chinese government was able to price their currency a little above what would have been the natural, freely traded rate, thus effectively imposing an export tax on Chinese goods yet still maintaining China's ultra-low prices. In this way, over a number of years, China's Central Bank accumulated an enormous holding of US Dollars, which shows little sign of diminishing.

So what does China do with it? It buys up assets in USA and Europe at a speed no less than fast and furious. Many of the West's most prestigious assets, together with their accumulated knowledge, technology and patents, are flying East, to the Celestial Empire. And the flow is accelerating. The massive acquisition of Western companies' assets is greatly facilitated by the fact that 'China' is in fact its own investment agency, so when the State covets a Western asset, it can quickly 'prompt' one of the State's surrogate industries, businesses, or financial institutions to swoop.

Apart from the historical and ever present religious motivation, wars have also been prompted and fought for the spoils, the material gains, and given the fact that China is rapidly acquiring the more prestigious 'spoils' of the West, the West-versus-China war is on-going right now, and China is winning hands down, while our business folk and government ministers grovel as they welcome the Chinese conquerors with all the deference a Chinese Emperor would have expected from his loyal subjects.

We don't have to sell our souls. There are other ways of pursuing our own prosperity, and providing the investment every industry, existing, growing, or starting, badly needs.

A dedicated Development Banking sector can spread growth across the nation, creating jobs and providing the wherewithal for existing companies to increase their competitiveness, as well as for infrastructural improvements. Investment targeted regionally can bring industry and growth to traditionally under-developed areas.

Traditional banking practice requires pre-existing assets as security, and loans carry no long-term commitment. Development Banking avoids these two limitations of traditional banking by securing the loan on the industrial or commercial project itself, thoroughly researched and costed, rather than outside assets alone, and by making a long-term commitment based on an intimate involvement with the business or project in which it is invested. This facilitates the creation of new business and new jobs, as well as providing secure finance with which existing business can maximize quality and productivity.

The two broad principles of Development Banking focus on analysis, and commitment.
The Development Bank begins by thoroughly researching each loan proposal from design to production, management and sales, calling on outside expert advice and assistance where necessary. A successful loan recipient will receive full back-up support in a close working and constructive partnership with the Development Bank, both on start-up, then continuously monitored with an ongoing flow of performance data. The Development Bank would levy a fixed charge covering its administrative costs, plus a small insurance premium.

Though handing out grants rather than repayable investments, Britain's (now defunct) Regional Development Agencies were otherwise similar to Regional Development Banks in that they based their financial assistance on their own thorough research and analysis of project details, costs and anticipated returns. With investment risk minimized through proper, pre-investment research and positive on-going monitoring of physical production, sales, and accounting, the business itself becomes the security for its investment loan.

By setting up Development Banks to operate at regional level, focusing on regional and local needs, investment benefits can be spread widely and uniformly across the nation, avoiding the usual pockets of non- or under-development. Local infrastructure can also be financed.

It isn’t rocket science.

We should always try to maintain a civilized relationship with our fellow occupants of an increasingly small planet, preferably without judgment of peoples and nations whose political, cultural and religious ideas may be different from our own. Criticism and a lack of tolerance of others can often be the first step towards war. And we should trade freely and fairly as it suits our own economic capabilities.

But first and foremost, we should set our own house in order, our politics, our economy, our financial systems... and our government, its obligations, its limitations and its expenditures. Everybody working, everybody working productively. Only thus will we prosper.

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