

Pure Math

I MOVED up to London in October 1956 and entered the Royal College of Science. This was one of the three colleges comprising Imperial College, in a broad expanse of noble buildings stretching south from the Royal Albert Hall to the museums and South Kensington. The small bed-sit that I rented in Beauchamp Place cost three pounds and ten shillings a week (350p); I paid the ICI scholarship and the Essex County Council grant into the National Provincial Bank opposite the station, opened my first account, bought yellow woolen gloves, and became an undergraduate.

The first year was a Preliminary Year, a crash course designed to bring ten classics students selected from the entire country up to the regular science-degree entry level from scratch. It had not been attempted before; Imperial Chemical Industries were sponsoring the government's pilot scheme and providing the scholarships.

We ten would have eight months to reach "A" level standards in pure and applied mathematics, chemistry, and physics, and "O" level in a modern language (I chose Russian).

The whole year was seen as something of an experiment: would it be possible to create technologists, the proverbial sows' ears, out

of us classical silk purses who had left school?

The Royal College of Science was in a tall building that was all portals and pediments, with Corinthian columns to either side of its portico. It was half way down Prince Consort Road (••). On one corner of Exhibition Road facing the post office stood a red brick building that housed The Computer that belonged to the mathematics department – they were big animals in those days, with tiny brains and huge bodies consuming kilowatts of power.

In California, IBM had just delivered the first hard drive in the world (September 13, 1956); it was as big as a washing machine with fifty-one 24-inch magnetic surfaced discs powered by a multi-horsepower electric motor, providing four megabytes of hard drive memory; Gordon Moore had yet to pronounce his famous Law, the doubling of microprocessor speed every eighteen months or two years, but it was already running.*

The College had been built in the reign of Queen Victoria and much of its equipment dated from that era too (although the whole campus was entering a forty-year phase of intense reconstruction). We had however the best teachers.

I had no favourite courses. I liked them all. I was at an age still eager to learn new things. In chemistry, both qualitative and quantitative analysis were taught by a prim middle aged lady with peroxide-yellow hair and a flashing smile that revealed teeth of a colour matching her hair.

“How much potassium cyanide did you add, Mr Irving?” she inquired (we were all *Mr* now); and then, “Mr Irving, we do not talk of ‘half teaspoonfuls’ in quantitative analysis.”

My interest in mathematics until now had been confined to idle speculation that the Stonehenge druids had been trying to calculate the value of π to a dozen decimal places and, in the absence of pencils, had heaved the gigantic monoliths into trilithons to create the necessary symbol π .

Thanks to our fine math lecturers that changed. Professor E. E. Preidel was a florid, jolly man with false teeth who met the eight-

* Gordon Moore, Intel co-founder, first stated this law in 1965.

month challenge magnificently with all of us; Professor W. G. Bickley had an even more formidable challenge to surmount as a lecturer – he was completely blind.

Sporting a white stick, and often an egg-sized lump on his forehead, he shuffled into the lecture theatre and dismissed his minder; crab-walking his fingers across the blackboard as a kind of writing matrix, he enthralled us as much as with the poetry of pure mathematics as with his ability to hold in his sightless memory the image of the equations he had already constructed, and to find his way back to any location in them without error or assistance.

I could see the intellectual attractions of pure mathematics, and learned it up to a point – I think that my abilities must have expired shortly after Euler's Theorem, which I studied with particular care, acting on the hunch that it might come up in the examination at the end of the year.

I DON'T think that I really fitted in very well at Imperial College. I don't know what the reason was, it may have been our complete poverty which separated me from the other students, it may have been the fact that I was a non-scientist in a Science College, trying to catch up.

I did almost immediately gravitate towards the literary side of student life, and contributed articles to the student magazine, *The Phoenix*. It had been founded many years earlier by H. G. Wells, and was produced at an old-fashioned printing works, Cullens, down in East Grinstead.

The editor, Tony Hodgson, became a good friend. The first article which I contributed, "Hitler's Paymaster was a Guildsman," was about Fritz Thyssen, the German steelworks owner, who had been an undergraduate at the City and Guilds, one of the three constituent colleges of the Imperial College.

The article was of course a tweak at the armour of authority. I never guessed that a few years later I would be working at the Thyssen steelworks in Germany myself. Thyssen had contributed to the funds of the Nazi party. The article was illustrated with a picture of Hitler and Thyssen, and Albert Vögler visiting a steelworks in Düs-

seldorf, Germany.

I obtained the printing block for the photograph from Hodder & Stoughton, who had published the Thyssen memoirs, *I Paid Hitler*, published in London in 1941. It was remarkable that a publisher should have retained the actual printing block at all.

Years later, I found myself investigating the book's authenticity, and concluded that British Intelligence had written much of it for Thyssen: the book never existed in German, and Thyssen could neither read nor write English, as it turned out. It was no coincidence that this book, and a similar book, *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations With Adolf Hitler on His Real Aims*, by Hermann Rauschning, published in 1940, had both used the same literary agent, Imre Révész, alias Emery Reeves, the émigré who also acted for Winston Churchill.

When Hodgson resigned as Editor of *The Phoenix*, I took over from him. We published some good articles, including one by Peter Jarman, who was a post-graduate investigating the phenomenon of sono-photoluminescence; I very soon published a poem by Fred (NAME) about a busty and popular student at the College of Music, Sheila Chester, known as "Sugar," who was particularly well spoken and went, so to speak, with the job of *The Phoenix* editor:

The thing about our Sugar, which makes us all rejoice
is the *raaather* pleasant sound of her *raaather* pleasant voice.
Between ourselves I've heard it said –
if they ask who told you, don't say Fred –
she takes it orf when she goes to bed
and the real voice ain't so noice.

Sheila protested to the principal of the School of Music about this libel. The latter advised her, "Sheila, darling, at your stage in your career, all publicity is good publicity." It is not, but she left it at that.

I passed the eight-month Preliminary Year course well. This effectively increased my total bag to eight "A" level passes and thirteen

“O” levels (•• CH). In October 1957 I therefore entered the first year of the main Physics course. It must have seemed an odd challenge to a Nobel Prize winner like P. M. S. Blackett, a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS), to find himself teaching a class of nineteen-year olds the simple wonders of dimensional analysis.¹

He knew the ropes, and being a card-carrying communist too he used the launching of the Russian Sputnik satellite on October 4, 1957 and the data released on that day to the press to calculate for us, using just this simple tool, dimensional analysis, the mass of the Earth and many other physical constants besides.*

Blackett was that kind of teacher. With this very tool, he also proved to us that e does equal mc^2 , and he weighed the Moon and performed various other mathematical conjuring tricks.

Unfortunately pure math would be taught during this year by a professor of dark and surly countenance with a German name and accent, one of those luckless pedagogues who are doomed never to be taken seriously by their classes, like “Fünf,” our physics teacher at Brentwood. The students taunted him mercilessly.

On one occasion one wag rolled an iron cannon ball down the wooden steps of the lecture theatre in the Huxley Building, and he simply packed up and left. I was furious, because I needed to learn. Much of the first year pure math course I therefore had to teach myself, buying several textbooks to cover our topics until I had got them into my head.

I had just sufficient spare money to haunt the Royal Festival Hall in the evenings for classical concerts. Once I spotted Victor Gollancz, the famous publisher, in the stalls; a young conductor, Colin Davis, just thirty, so moved me with one performance that I wrote him the first fan letter of my life (the second, forty years later, went to Victoria Glendinning for her Anthony Trollope biography, given me by a fellow prisoner in Pentonville).

And then there was Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*; that summer of 1958 (••) the Royal Festival Hall was showing a Soviet Russian film of the opera by Roman Tikhominov, in a striking

* Sputnik I, launched Oct 4, 1957, weighed 183 pounds, and took about 98 minutes to orbit the Earth on its elliptical path.

sepia overcast colour.* I must have seen it twenty times. I had no friends in London during the vacations; for a while Lensky became one by proxy.

IMPERIAL College had left the National Union of Students and was never affiliated to the University of London Union, ULU, either.

We considered ourselves a cut above the Malet Street lot. Their ULU newspaper *Sennet* was well produced, but routinely disdained the IC, and we willingly held ourselves aloof from them. I edited *The Phoenix* for two years, and by livening up its content and introducing colour and paid advertising I turned round its circulation and finances within just two terms.

David Harris, editor of *Sennet*, took a dislike to me – the first of many safely established editors to do so. When I issued a mischievous pamphlet in about 1957 alleging that “seventeen percent” of London university students were communists, he angrily headlined the story but could not pick holes in my figure (which was of course invented, though not necessarily untrue. A prime number always makes copy sound authentic).

My foolhardy pamphlet also identified our physics professor Patrick Blackett as a card-carrying communist, which was true; as Blackett was head of our department, and called the shots in every other respect, this was perhaps an easily diagnosable tactical mistake.

In the first year of the regular Physics degree course (1957-58) I ran squarely on to the rocks: firstly, I do not know how; secondly, it was surely a blessing in disguise. While I passed both chemistry and applied mathematics I was baffled to learn that I had failed the pure mathematics, so vital for any physics course. I therefore had to retake the whole Physics First Year from the autumn of 1958.

To pay for this non-scholarship year in college I took a job with the construction firm John Laing Ltd., who were erecting a modern lime-green Physics Buildings on the corner of Prince Consort Road

* It was released in the USA on September 13, 1959; but earlier in the UK?

(••) and Queen's Gate. A. J. Potts was the company's wise old agent on the site, and he took me onto the concrete gang.

We worked long hours. The job was demanding in the best of weathers, and winter was approaching. Once a bay or column was being poured, work had to continue until the pour was complete. We completed the whole intermediate roof-level slab on Christmas Eve.

I could scramble up and down the outside of the scaffolding like a funnelweb spider, and walk on the narrow girders ten floors up with parts of the concrete pump on my shoulders without flinching.

I would not do this now. I was physically very fit, but I could not afford proper or balanced food, and the nutrition and flying cement dust caused chronic skin havoc, and it would not go away.

On days when I could break off early enough, I clumped over the road into the lecture theater to sit in on classes in the back row, the wet cement still dripping off my boots. If I could not get away, I read up the lectures later in my room.

I had moved into a first-floor room, a former conservatory with its glass windows painted over, tacked onto the rear of No. 37 Gloucester Road, where I lived off eggs boiled in a copper kettle. I was, and I remain, grateful to the Laing company and to their man Potts, who has probably long passed away, for indulging me in this way, and my silent bitterness when the unexpected letter came from the college at the end of this effort will need no descriptive language from me here.

ONE afternoon a week was free of lectures, and the college had gained permission for us to attend the Royal College of Art in the Huxley Building across Exhibition Road – its facade still cratered and pitted from a V-1 near miss. I had done well at art, and taken "A" level at scholarship level. My parents were both artists of course, and three, now four of my daughters would be too.

Professor Carel Weight himself looked in on our classes. His life models were unexpectedly enjoyable to draw and paint, muscular middle aged men or grotesquely obese women whose rolls of fat

and wrinkles all slopped and slid back into the same dunes and ridges each time they resumed their pose.

It was all very unerotic – the seated or reclining nude and twenty students silently thumbing and measuring and cross hatching, with the model's age a useful barrier beyond which sensuality did not easily cross. Until one day, that is, when the model was a girl barely, very barely, into her twenties, as was I, and it proved difficult to regard her purely as an artist would after all.

Years later, my daughters occasionally sat for me. Once I overheard Beatrice whisper to her sisters that she had just praised my likeness of her as she felt I needed encouragement.

She turned into the most accomplished portrait artist in the family, in my view, and I was very hurt for her when St Martin's School of Art turned her down in favour of her older sister Pilar; Pilar's works were more modern and she went on to study art at university. The naturalist, lifelike, art requires real talent and hard work. Junk art, *entartete Kunst*, has been à la mode ever since the Germans lost their war against it. I painted Josephine, the oldest, when she was in her thirties, and by a freak of light it showed her as she was ten years later when she died.

SOME of the regular students, those who had orthodox parents, scholarships, and digs, found me hard to take. Unlike them, I had no money; I could not stand them rounds in the bar. One or two said I was crazy.

Peter Levin, a student a year or two ahead of me, was later a prominent anti-highways campaigner in the Archway area of North London. He had a wide face and his thick-lensed glasses slid down his nose when he grinned, which meant he was for ever poking them back up again. He had a lively wit – he proposed a new unit of measure, the *millihelen*, the quantity of female beauty which would launch one ship; and he labeled the Student Union's uninspiring refectory the Department of Food Technology.

My other pals at the university were older – Jim Carter, from Manchester, who had done his national service and boasted of how he and other students had hoisted a lecturer's car onto the Union

building's roof. Carter said that this lecturer boasted he was getting the most incredible mileage per gallon, which just proved his prowess at tuning engines, he said; the same students who had been secretly topping up the gas tank each night now began siphoning off the petrol, until he was getting no miles per gallon at all.

My flatmate in the "conservatory", Mike Gorb, shared Levin's religion. He was very popular. We went out one night with a pot of – I hope washable – paint, changing a well-known local street-name to Kensington Gorb in his honour. Mike was at that time involved with a pale, willowy ballet dancer from Finland, Ulla [••?].

"You know the problem with sex," he said one morning with a friendly leer. "When you pee next morning it comes out in two streams and you don't know which to aim with."

It was a problem I was not yet familiar with, but I nodded knowingly. Yes, Mike, a chemical engineer and keen Alpine mountaineer, was one of my closest friends for two years.

I broke off at a tender, indeed almost historic moment in my relations with Sugar one evening in the little conservatory, explaining that Mike had promised to supply the necessary item should need arise, at which indignant point the operation was abruptly interrupted – "You *told Mike*," being her only remaining words that I can recall. Since they were clearly mood killers, I decided never to get involved with such items again.

I bumped into Ulla(••?) a few years later in Hyde Park, and asked after Mike.

"Oh didn't you know," she replied, words that usually presage ill tidings. "His rope snapped in the Alps and he fell a thousand feet."

I spoke formal condolences but as we separated I began instinctively to calculate: thirty-two feet per second per second. How many seconds would Mike have been in free fall, aware that it was all over; I stopped before I reached an answer.

I got on well enough with the college's other prominent Jew – John Bloch (sp••?), a tall, good-natured individual with a tuft of black hair like a forelock over his brow.

At the time of the Suez crisis in October–November 1956 (and the Hungarian Uprising, about which I wrote a book a quarter-century later), there was a pro-Israeli demonstration and my memory tells me that I fell in with those marchers. But if photographs be examined of the crowds in Trafalgar Square later in October 1956, listening to Aneurin Bevan's brilliant, witty, scornful attack on Anthony Eden's "police action" in Suez, launched against Egypt in concert with the Israelis, then I will also be seen cheering the wonderful oratory of this Labour firebrand from the terraces in front of the National Gallery. [•• *This is repetition of an earlier allusion to this speech*].

I HAD had nothing to do with girls, as Sugar had discovered, and rather steered clear of them. During the first years at RCS I had kept up a colorful weekly correspondence with Grumbler, my erstwhile dancing partner in Brentwood; she worked at the Ilford film laboratories, and her letter, posted in Brentwood each Thursday morning, was always in my post box at the college that same evening. That was in the days before computerization speeded everything up of course. (There was one girl that I liked in our Preliminary Year, Judy Taylor; well developed and friendly, she lived in Ealing.)

There were only thirty girls at the 3,000 strong Imperial College at that time. We featured one blonde beauty, Xandra Williams (••), as a pin up in *The Phoenix* that last year; she looked strikingly like Bente, I now realize. The real college beauty at Imperial College was a raven-haired Iranian, with great class – Avid Kazemi, studying chemistry. She lived *en famille* in Ealing digs. Stroking the family cat when I visited for tea, she informed me that this was her pussy, and then said that she supposed she ought to put that differently, all the while studying the effect of her words on me.

Her words were wasted entirely; at that age young males are some way behind their more predatory female counterparts. I took her to one concert, to the envy of my pals, but two days later she caught sight of me in the cement-stained black and yellow donkey-jacket of the Laing concrete gang, and that was the end of whatever beginning there might have been. I heard a rumour years later

that she was beheaded during the rule of the Ayatollah Khomeini; I hope this is untrue.

The first girl to make a lasting impression on me was a tourist from Embajadores, a poor quarter of Madrid, who stopped me for directions in Cromwell Road one morning. “Chony” – Ascensión Diaz – was just visiting.

We went out a couple of times for coffee. She invited me up to her tiny hotel room and to my profound consternation decided to change dresses in front me in a flurry of petticoats, bodices, and lace lingerie, and I must now suppose she was disappointed that I did not rise to the bait, if bait it was. Her laughing manner and gay abandon and golden blond hair, lots of it, left a hidden mark; when she carelessly suggested that I might call on her one day if ever I was in Madrid, I firmly resolved to do just that, and before many weeks had passed.

I had never left England before. I was not yet twenty-one. I tacked a trip down to Madrid on to a planned hitchhiking tour of Western Europe, and set out in (•• January?) 1959 on the Hook of Holland ferry.

I carried my kit in an empty typewriter case (the typewriter itself had just been stolen from No. 37 Gloucester Road by a sneak thief). I wrote two diaries covering the NUMBER week odyssey – the first is lost, the second I have not read from that day to this.

The journey took me through Holland and down to a Munich covered by deep snow; on an impulse I went over to Berchtesgaden and from there up by post bus to the heights of the Obersalzberg, to visit the bombed ruins of Adolf Hitler’s Berghof.

In those days you could descend from the “Zum Türken” inn down a steep staircase into the bowels of the mountain and visit the whole tunnel labyrinth built by Martin Bormann for the Nazi leadership; now most of it has been sealed off. With machine gun slits at the foot of each staircase, and gastight armourplate doors, it seemed pretty impregnable to me, but then I was never a military man. I found that Hitler’s lavatory was still there, though missing its essential fixtures and, well, the less written about the next few minutes the better.

A Volkswagen Kombi driver stopped for me outside Linz and took me onward to Vienna. "Uncle" had an apartment there, he said, grinning in the darkness; I could stay there for the night. When we got there his uncle turned out to be Asian-looking, in fact there was no family likeness at all.

He agreed that he could give me a bed as soon as his girls came off duty – they were still at work right now. I had a mental image of somebody not unlike Chony dutifully bent over a whirring sewing machine.

Shortly he led me across a corridor into a darkened front room, which had curtained windows at both ends. Faint martial music was thudding through the wall at one end. He towed the curtain gently aside between finger and thumb, and electric light filtered in from the room beyond.

"Flom here, window," whispered Uncle, with a knowing slit-eyed wink. "Flom other side, *millah!*" I puzzled. He meant mirror. My mind was thrown into an adolescent turmoil.

I looked briefly through the half-silvered glass and fell back a step; I even heard Monsieur Jacottet's voice saying it in French, *recouler un pas*, and "– put zat in your idioms books."

I was two feet from a plump blond naked girl being vigorously humped by a similarly attired young man, to the sound of music, loud music, the aforementioned thudding march melodies.

"They no see you," invited Uncle. "Look all you want, and then *undless* and go to bed."

I decided on brief reflection not to undress, and fled after retrieving my little typewriter case from the kitchen table where I had left it.

In the street outside, I checked its contents. It had been rifled, but I had all my money in my trouser pocket. Disillusioned, I wandered the streets of Vienna for the rest of the night. The next evening I bought a ticket for "*Der Rosenkavalier*" at the Opera House, a building perhaps a mile from the cell in which I chance to write these lines of reminiscences, as what might be called a political prisoner, forty-six years later.

THE next stages of the European journey, down to Paris and then Madrid, are something of a blur. I would have to consult the diary to see what else happened and how I did it.

Chony was surprised, even nonplussed, to see me when I arrived. I was incoherent and inarticulate; I could not speak Spanish then. Wiser now by many years, I assume that this twenty-year old Latin beauty had quite forgotten her invitation. After all, several weeks had passed.

We did make one tongue-tied excursion that February 1959, to the Valle de los Caidos, the mountain memorial in the Guadarrama Valley north of Madrid where are buried 33,872, the guide books tell us, of the two million victims of the Spanish Civil War. I bought half a dozen picture postcards of the giant stone cross – 150 meters tall – that tops the mountain, and sent them to my enemies, real and supposed, at Imperial College, who were now quite numerous, including Richard Garnett, the pompous union president, adding in his case the inscription, “Wish you were here.”

I myself turned up back in college, very late, not long after.

Twenty years later I commuted occasionally from London to Madrid and took part in Radio Televisión Española’s weekly history discussion programme (with just two channels, the wholesome choice on Wednesday evenings was always either football or us. Spain invariably chose football).

Foolishly, very foolishly, I once allowed curiosity to get the better of me, paid the two pesetas and took the Metro back down to Embajadores to ring that same doorbell. Chony’s aged mother redirected me to the apartment block nearby, where her daughter now lived. An ample-bosomed, drooping, cigarette-smoking slattern opened the door, in a dirty grey dress, with greasy hair and hollow eyes; she was clutching a squalling infant under one arm and fending off several more that milled around her.

I looked past her with expectant eyes, hoping to see the lovely Latin girl with golden hair upon whom I had first set eyes in Cromwell Road, but . . . memories are better left undisturbed: un-revisited: as they were: all those years ago.

WHEN I returned to South Kensington early in March 1959, the spring term, the all-important examination term, had already started. I was called before the Rector, Professor Sir Patrick Linstead, FRs; I made myself comfortable in an armchair in his office, was abruptly instructed to stand, and given a well-earned dressing down. He interrogated me as to my intentions, and I do not even recall my answer. I proposed, I said, to continue studying to my own satisfaction.

The examinations were held in April 1959 (••). As well as the troublesome pure math, the college had also obliged me to re-sit the other examinations, but I passed these again easily.

As for the pure math paper, to my relief, when I opened it this time, there was even a question on Euler's Theorem, which was my speciality. Not having felt entirely comfortable about the integrity of the earlier 1958 results, if I may put it no stronger than that, I took the precaution of making a second copy of my math answers. I found by comparing notes with other students that I had four-fifths of the answers correct, well above the normal pass level. It seemed that my future at Imperial College was now secure.

I loathed university now, and I suspected that the institution felt similarly toward me. Perhaps I had been somehow unbalanced by it all. I prepared the new edition of *The Phoenix* in a mood of misanthropy.

I wrote an editorial about the students and staff, called "The First Cuckoos of Spring," and designed a particularly tasteless cartoon for the front cover. It featured our august rector, Professor Linstead; I thought I had captured his rather squashed features, piggy eyes, and pointy nose rather well – he was anyway instantly recognizable. The caricature showed him reading this, the latest issue of *The Phoenix*, with a frown; on the cover that he was holding, he was seen again, inevitably smaller and angrier; et cetera, *ad infinitum*, and on the tiniest of all the covers he was jumping up and down on a shredded copy of the magazine. It was prophetic, because Linstead ordered every copy withdrawn and destroyed and the editor, myself, dismissed.

Felix, the Imperial College's fortnightly student newspaper, prudently took his side in the ensuing "free speech" debate – the first of several in which I was to feature. It was felt that my boats were already burning brightly, and other students were careful not to cluster too close to me in case more college lightning struck.

The Phoenix magazine operated out of the Press Room on the top floor of the Student Union building, overlooking the Royal Albert Hall. It was a large comfortable room, with oak desks, furniture, and a telephone. As my financial circumstances were permanently straitened, I moved in my private property and slept there.

This happy situation continued until the Rector ordered my dismissal as editor. For a few more weeks I clung to the Press Office, but then my more conformist enemies in the Student Union – the union president Richard Garnett springs to mind – ordered me out. I recall that a Jewish student came into the Press Room and offered a free consultation with his father, a psychiatrist – "he will find you an interesting case." I took it as a form of calculated sneer, but he may have meant it well.

For a few weeks, as the vacation began, I moved into the rapidly emptying Hall of Residence on the south side of the Quadrangle.

I now owned a record player and a vinyl recording of Dvorak's *New World* Symphony. Since another stay-behind student was similarly armed, we experimented, blasting the symphonies simultaneously from opposite ends of a long corridor, to see if they would cancel each other out and leave a dead zone in the middle with no Dvorak at all. The experiment was inconclusive, largely because my disc had the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert von Karajan, and his the London Symphony Orchestra, the LSO.

Ten (••) years later I listened to Winifred Wagner telling me how Hitler had cancelled out Karajan completely, after the great conductor – who habitually conducted without a score – inadvertently missed out a bar of *Die Meistersinger* at a command performance for Prince Paul of Yugoslavia in June 1939; the orchestra tailed off into silence, and the curtain had to be rung down on the perplexed baritone. Karajan was never ever to play at Bayreuth, the Great Dictator ruled. I wondered if Karajan ever had performance-anxiety

nightmares after that.

CHANCE, or perhaps it was evil good fortune, smiled upon me almost at once. Each year the London University student union, ULU, sponsored a street carnival to raise funds for a worthy cause. In 1959 however they announced that the cause would not be cancer research, but some body in South Africa that was not only extreme left-wing, but anti-apartheid, pro-communist, and generally everything I detested.

They advertised for an editor for the customary rag newspaper, *Carnival Times*. I have mentioned that our college held ULU in low esteem, so it was with few qualms that I attended the meeting at ULU, and put forward my name as the experienced editor that I by now was; a fellow conspirator seconded me, and I was democratically, brothers, appointed rag editor there and then.

The carnival would aim to raise about twenty thousand pounds for this body in South Africa – which was not named; and my friends and I made it our aim to ensure that not a penny would remain after the costs of our *Carnival Times* had been paid. The purpose was to kill a lot of birds with one stone, preferably not including myself.

SINCE the fools had appointed me, I set about doing all I could to sabotage and destroy and wreak havoc. I visited the printers, the Haycock Press, in Camberwell, South-East London, and arranged to print an exceptionally lavish edition, including very many pages of full-colour. The paper was to be of the very best, “semi-calendered” quality; I remember the word they used

In the heart of the magazine which I designed was an eight page supplement designed to sink it like a stone and without trace on the day it was launched. At my bidding, South Africa House generously donated a half page advertisement. This alone would have outraged most of the student readers in London at that time. Getting bolder, I also invited Sir Oswald Mosley’s organisation to place a half-page advert for their newspaper *Action*, in return for printing our posters.

The editorial was entitled “Battle for Europe”; it contained much that I believed strongly at the time, but much that was written with tongue firmly in cheek. One article was called “Christopher Robin – the facts”. Another, the main article, “Apartheid – the facts.” Although it was given my name as by-line, in fact I had not written the text; it was written by a very good friend who had, however, by that time embarked on a career with Kleinwort Benson, and he wished to protect his future.

I did, however, contribute the main cartoon featured on that page: it showed a ULU procession through the streets, with the student weirdos familiar in such events. The two leading students were both bearded hippies, and they were holding a banner reading, “Apartheid is beastly”. Between them was an African student, his simian features accentuated for cartoon purposes. One student leader was saying to the other, “Do we have to march with these people between us?” The attack was on student hypocrisy.

I ordered 20,000 copies of the magazine to be printed and a colossal printing bill resulted. The Deputy President of the University of London Union, David Jacques, authorised the bill, and the fate of the entire carnival was sealed.

For a time the secret about *Carnival Times*’s contents was kept. One of the printers – he turned out to be the brother of the late William Joyce – connived with me in destroying every galley proof that might be lying around.

A few days before publication day, student leaders visited the printing works. Unfortunately, one copy of the lethal eight-page supplement was on a spike hanging on the wall. It was unspiked, smoothed out, and stared at for several seconds by these student leaders. The penny dropped. They ordered every copy of the magazine destroyed.

The carnival went ahead, the students had their fun, but every penny of the proceeds went to the printers, and not a penny went to the Communist Left in southern Africa.

DURING this *Carnival Times* episode in April 1959 Peter Levin’s sense of humour failed him. I had picked up a small stack of Mos-

ley's newsletter *Action* at Vauxhall Bridge Road – they were doing the poster printing for us – and left it in the Union Building (probably as a general provocation: I can think of no other reason). His face contorted, Levin attacked the heap; he tore and twisted and scrumpled at the papers like a demented wife attacking an unfaithful husband's wardrobe. I had never seen anything like it.

He waged an anti-Irving campaign for years afterwards. When I formed a student organisation, whose name I have forgotten, but it may have been Counterforce, I designed an emblem consisting of two black arrows in a circular white field on a red background. Levin exclaimed to anybody who listened that it was clearly based on a swastika. And perhaps it was, a deliberate attempt to annoy.

I knew how to get under the skin of officious busybodies like him, and saw no reason to refrain.

THE London student newspapers reported on all this in terms of pious shock, horror, and righteous indignation. University College's newspaper *Pi* unimaginatively used the word "fascist" in its headline, and the ULU organ *Sennet* was no kinder. The London evening papers and national press gnawed and nibbled uncertainly at the unusual story.

The *Daily Mail* sent a slim, dark-haired reporter, Clifford Lutton, to tackle me at the end of April 1959. I met him in the almost deserted Imperial College bar – it was now the vacation, and I was awaiting the crucial examination results – and scrounged my usual half pint of cider off him, and then another. I consequently did not treat this reporter with the awe and respect that such gentlemen surely deserve.

He asked about what he called my "pilgrimage" to Hitler's Berghof a few weeks earlier, of which other students had informed him; Richard Garnett had even claimed I was not a student at all. That alone should have warned me what kind of article he was writing.

Talking of the *Carnival Times* escapade, while not suspecting the true depths of our little group's perfidy, he echoed the *Pi* headline.

“You seem a bit of a mild fascist, if you ask me,” he said.

I saw no basis for any such judgment, but airily retorted: “You can call me what you like” – a foolish thing, as it turned out, to say to any journalist, let alone one with a pad in one hand and a pencil in the other, because there it was in his newspaper the next day under the heading “MILD FASCIST PULLS A FAST ONE”:

“You can call me a mild fascist if you like,” said Mr Irving, leaning against the Imperial College bar. (•• CH *wording*)

The article glittered with such libelous nuggets, most of them untrue.

THE phrase *mild fascist* triggered an unseen chain reaction. Within days, if not hours, scissors in an anonymous, heavily protected building in Bloomsbury were clipping out that item dated May 1, 1959, and fingers were pasting it into a newly opened dossier headed

Board of Deputies: Director of Research: re “David Irving.”

After my first book appeared four years later, and fame began to accrue, my lawyer protested and the *Mail* withdrew the story. They rubber-stamped their “morgue” copy, as Michael Rubinstein informed me, NOT TO BE USED.

From that day, May 1, 1959, onward however the Board of Deputies, about whom we shall hear more from time to time, ensured that that little one-liner (shorn of course of its date and origin) would be trotted out to journalists in need, of whom, as the half century passed and my career advanced, there were eventually multitudes.

As for Clifford Luton the reporter, he joined the BBC, where his own career fizzled into oblivion after his indictment for certain improprieties [*child-molesting*: CH; *evidently some time after Jan 1972, when he was still reporting for the BBC from N Ireland*]. I don’t hold grudges, but it seems there is some justice in the world; not that I was entirely free of blame myself in the original affair.

College lightning now struck. Out of the blue came the Registrar's letter informing me that I had again failed the examination in pure mathematics, and this time the failure was permanent.

Knowing what I knew, I was baffled. I sent a formal letter of inquiry to the university authorities. They were adamant, that I must pack and leave at once, after squaring a bill for four pounds for laboratory breakages and dilapidations. It was useless to protest. I stilled my protesting heart, and left.

Upsetting though the immediate outcome was, these three years had chiseled the first defining serifs into my character. But I was homeless, in more senses than one. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life, and had no qualifications, apart from the many languages that I had learned and the examinations that I had passed at school and in University. I was worried about the disappointment for my mother, who had scrimped so hard for me to attend university, the only one of her brood to do so. I did not often visit home now, and I cannot recall how or when I broke it to her.

The first problem was my immediate future. My National Service obligation had been deferred, as with all university students, but only so long as I was in full time study. At any moment call-up papers would now arrive. Two years' military service in the ranks was inevitable.

The Royal Air Force, I heard, was offering a three-year Russian-language course at Cambridge University; I would be an officer, on full pay. I sashayed into the RAF recruiting office in Holborn, and signed on. The immediate psychological and Intelligence test was no hurdle; when I returned for the medical check-up a few days later they told me my score was the highest for several years. I presumed that they said that to all their new recruits; they solemnly disabused me of that presumption.

I passed their simple Russian test too and I saw myself already ensconced in Cambridge, drawing an officer's pay and not even wearing uniform, let alone boots. A few days later a letter from the Air Ministry informed me, with thanks, that my application had been rejected, as I had been certified medically unfit for military

service.

Unfit? Perhaps it was a holdover from my eating deficiencies that year. Perhaps it was just a useful formula. I was unaware at the time that the RAF Russian course was sponsored by the secret service, *i.e.* the SIS. Applicants will have been more closely screened and vetted, as they would certainly end up in sensitive positions at Akrotiri, Cheltenham, or elsewhere.

NOW I really was on my own, and I had no visible future. I was living in a small first-floor room above the Fleur-de-Lys patisserie at No. 13 Gloucester Road. As concreting work ended on the Physics Building, Laing's transferred me to a large new construction site just opening in Great Queen Street, in Holborn; a new building was going up for the Prudential, the excavations were complete, and pouring the foundations was about to begin, the big-money phase for the concrete gang.

I worked sometimes one hundred hours a week that summer, and one weekend I remember taking home twenty-nine pounds in my pay packet; I had never jingled so much cash in my pocket in my life before. In those days *The Star*, *The Evening News* and the *Standard* all cost tuppence each (or less than one modern penny). I loved the heavy work, the calloused hands, the feeling of utter physical exhaustion with which I arrived back in Gloucester Road each evening. I could have done that happily for the rest of my working life.

I bounced around the excavations in my chariot, the diesel dump-truck, like a modern Jehu, and made many friends including Michael, a medical student who later headed a junior doctors' union. Michael was very worldly-wise about women, or at least he acted that way.

I had met one such, an educated Spanish girl called Pilar, on the staircase at No. 13 Gloucester Road; her Madrid accent reminded me of Chony, and that was the initial lure. I began dating her that summer, and earning big money, and polishing my brown boots until they shone, and I began wondering, gradually, about my real future.

Two things happened simultaneously that autumn (1959), creating a nexus, one of those fateful “either/or” crossroads that crop up so rarely in real life. I had half-decided to work in Germany, so as to lick at least one language into good shape; but then John Laing Ltd., sizing me up, offered to take me out of the concrete gang and train me as a tower-crane driver.

I talked it over with Pilar. The crane job would have been a step up, in fact a hundred steps up or more; but it would have been akin to solitary confinement, locked into a lofty steel and glass cabin, with none of the rollicking fun and physical hardship of the gang.

I applied by letter to a steel firm, Krupp’s, in Germany, for a job in their rather notorious steelworks, and while I awaited a reply I told Laing I would think over their offer for a while. The reply when it came from Essen was not just negative, but couched in a thinly veiled anglophobia that made me chuckle once I had – with the aid of a dictionary – unraveled its terminology: *Nachdem unsere Stahlbetriebe wegen der alliierten Entflechtungsbestimmungen abmontiert worden waren...* there was “regrettably” no opening for the unskilled steelworker I aspired to become.

I took the letter down to “Hades,” the coffee shop we haunted in Exhibition Road, glad of an excuse to chat with the restaurant’s young German manageress, Christa; she had a mound of chestnut hair, soulful green eyes, and a busty, well constructed figure.

The word *Entflechtungsbestimmungen* did not translate easily, we decided, and might need further meetings. Putting our heads together, we concocted a letter to Krupp’s steelmaking rival, the Phoenix-Rheinrohr concern; it belonged to the Thyssen dynasty, whose founder Fritz Thyssen we have already met in these pages.

Suddenly that historic crossroads loomed right ahead. Laing were pressing for a decision; but simultaneously the Thyssen works agreed to offer me a job at their big steel mill at Mülheim in the Ruhr valley.

In a spirit of great adventure I accepted the German offer. Christa was not happy at this development. Nor was Pilar.

THIS was one of those turning points that one encounters in life,

and it is difficult to see in advance which is the correct road to take. In retrospect of course one can always see where one has taken the wrong step, and I was to take many in the years that followed. On this occasion, however, I believe I took the right one.

I signed up with the Thyssen company, and after a few days, and much to the regret of Pilar, the girl whom I had only met a few weeks earlier, I set out for Germany, carrying all my belongings in that little suitcase.

I GOT off the train at Mülheim and at once had a sense of foreboding. It was an ugly town, with no heart, and I had no friends. I reported to the steelworks, and was subjected to a medical examination for their insurance purposes. It extended over two days, and I passed with flying colours. I no longer gave the RAF a second thought.

A week or two later, now a Ruhr steelworker, and aged twenty-one, I received my call-up papers from London, and at the same time a letter from the National Provincial Bank at South Kensington, referring to the current unsatisfactory position of my account, and requiring me to clear the outstanding four pounds and seventeen shillings overdraft *immediately*; I sent a smug reply drawing attention to the Mülheim postmark on the letter, and inviting them to stow their David Irving file where little daylight has ever penetrated.

As for the National Service Board, I reminded them that I had been declared unfit for military service, and referred them to the Air Ministry's letter. I did not hear from either again.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Patrick Maynard Stuart Blackett, then of Manchester, won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1948 for his discoveries, made by the Wilson cloud-chamber method, in nuclear physics and on cosmic radiation.