

Child of the Arts

I have Rolf Hochhuth to thank for having become involved in this unexpected controversy. When I had first met him on January 26, 1965 he was already one of Germany's most celebrated playwrights. His only rival was the left-wing's darling, the novelist Günter Grass, whose anti-war reputation (*The Tin Drum*) would crash in flames in August 2006 when he belatedly acknowledged that he had volunteered for Heinrich Himmler's Waffen SS in November 1944.

Rolf and I became the best of friends from that 1965 day on, improbable though it might seem, and distance and the passage of years did little to destroy that friendship. In about 1967 he said, "David, to the right of you is just an abyss." [*Rechts von Dir ist nur der Abgrund.*] To which I replied with a smile, "– and to the right of you is the whole of human life." [*Rechts von Dir spielt sich das ganze menschliche Leben ab*] knowing that the one statement was as over-simplified and false as was the other. I had become well known through my book on Dresden; Rolf was known to me for his first great drama, *Der Stellvertreter*, The Representative, about Pope Pius XII, and his seeming failure to raise his voice against the Nazis' treatment of the Jews.¹ Victor Schuller, an editor at *Stern*

magazine, brought us together over a tape recorder in the magazine's Hamburg office, in the way that magazines do.

Rolf shared Josephine's date of birth, April 1; he was seven years older than I. He was a rare and gifted writer, though his plays were often wordy and impenetrable. Half of his face was permanently paralyzed; his mother's alcoholism was perhaps the cause, and only his closest friends actually noticed the defect. He was living with his unusually tall first wife Marianne in Basel when I first knew him. He confessed to me that he had a weakness for these big "brutal" (his word) women. His second wife Dana, a Serbian who had been their au pair, was also cast in this violent, glass-door smashing mould.

I found Marianne an agreeable if *recherchée* companion. I recall escorting her down Kurfürstendamm during Erwin Piscator's premier of *Soldaten*, his play about Churchill and General Sikorski. She was an inch or two taller even than I, or such was my impression, and she persisted in wearing a miniskirt and knee-length white boots with her hair in a bubbly Shirley Temple hair style that attracted glances from one end of that busy Berlin thoroughfare to the other. I had no quarrel with her, but she thought better of Pilar than of me, it seems; the Nazis had guillotined her mother for some kind of resistance activity, and she seemed to transfer some of that culpability, without inquiring how I felt about it, onto me.

Over a meal in a Basel pub, Rolf told me one mildly smutty story about an impotent man whose doctor prescribed *ein Phosphormittel* – a phosphorus medication; the punch line, the patient's anxious cry, "*Herr Doktor, es soll stehen, nicht leuchten!*" would have passed Pilar by had she not primly requested a translation.¹ (Her insistence that all conversations in her presence be conducted in either English or Spanish had already led to the virtual collapse of a Berlin dinner party to which Wolf Jobst Siedler invited us). I provided a translation in modest Spanish. Pilar went bright red, and in the same language expressed consternation that Rolf had told an

1 "I just want it erect, not gleaming!"

indelicate story in front of his au pair. Dana requested a translation of that, and erupted with the coarse laughter of which Serbians are capable.

“He had the story from me in the first place!” she said. I thought it wiser not to translate that.

Marianne and Rolf were living at that time in a fine old house in Basel where Friedrich Nietzsche had once lived.

The first sign that things were falling apart was when Pilar and I arrived there as usual for a weekend of intellectual badinage with Rolf. Marianne stated – in that way that embittered spouses do have – that Rolf’s guests were not welcome under that roof, no matter what the lawyers said, and that I would find that there were plenty of hotels in the town where we might reside in future. Later, Rolf invited us to spend a month at Klosters with them and the Kenneth Tynans in January 1969.² I got to know him better during that Klosters stay, since neither of us had any particular urge to go skiing.

Anyway the secret came out there: as we trudged up one snowy road and Marianne and Pilar fell behind, he admitted that he and Marianne had had a falling-out over Dana. Marianne overheard, and echoed his words. I tried to defend him, but he admitted that the evidence of their relationship was to be born later that year. Pilar had guessed there was something afoot between Rolf and Dana earlier. Rolf had warned me once never to allow a wife to meet a girlfriend, no matter on what basis of trust – “they will unite and form up against you!” There certainly seemed to be an odd alliance between Marianne and Dana. It struck me that, when we were in Basel, Marianne told him to take Dana out for dinner or the theatre with us, as she was not inclined. That had seemed like a risky marriage-therapy to us.

A solemn boy called Alexander was the product, and divorce from Marianne the consequence. Rolf told me later that Dana had accepted his cash to procure an abortion, but spent it on less homicidal things instead. Marianne eventually made off with that Nietzsche house in their settlement. Dana repeated this profitable feat a few years later, provoking a wry comment from Rolf about the

number of houses he was having to buy for his various spouses. "*Fünf Minuten Rittmeister, mein lieber David*," he exclaimed with a laugh that betrayed his real sense of hurt, "*Ein Leben lang Zahlmeister*." [Five minutes as riding master– and paymaster for the rest of your life]. Looking at Pilar, I felt sure it would never happen to us.

I watched Sasha, this new son, grow up each time I visited Rolf's house in Basel, which was often, as I was researching just up the autobahn in the German military archives in Freiburg. His father's play about the Pope had become so famous that, when Sasha was asked at school what his father did, he said: "*Stellvertreter*," to the guffaws of his classmates; the little boy ran home crying. Sitting on their balcony at Riehen one day I asked him, then aged about seven, what he wanted to become. "I think I'd like to be a landscape gardener," he said gravely, after some consideration. "You have just a garden to look after," and he gestured toward the flower beds below, "and no personal responsibility to bear at all."

Rolf and I sat over meals in cafes and inns in Switzerland and Germany, chatting and roaring with laughter. Never were sixty seconds that I spent with this volcanic writer a minute that I would ever consider wasted. I took along little spiral notebooks, and quite unashamedly wrote down notes on our conversational excursions as we went along. His methods were a revelation. In his Basel home he once flung open a cupboard crying, "Never open fan mail, David! There is no law that says you ever have to open letters!" The cupboard was wedged tight with thousands of letters still in their envelopes. "If they send books to sign, I keep the book and the letters go in here! If you answer," he explained, "that only encourages them to write to you again!" Another tip he gave me was this: "When writing to any person of standing, always address him as 'Dear Herr Professor.'"

His wit was far richer than his ponderous, monologue-laden plays might indicate, tinged always with an awareness of the precarious human condition – the recognition that we are here by God's grace

alone, and it is up to each individual to determine to what use he puts his allotted time. "Bis vierzig," he said to me in April 1971, touched with unnecessary melancholy at having just passed that milestone, his fortieth birthday, "steht man auf einer Rolltreppe, die einen ständig nach aufwärts trägt. Mit vierzig aber ist man auf einem kurzen Teppich, der einem jederzeit rückartig weggezogen werden kann." [Until forty, you're standing on an escalator and steadily going up. With forty you're on a short rug that can be jerked away from beneath you at any moment.]

He hated lawyers for their lethargy and avarice. He started one essay, or perhaps it was a poem, with the words, "Er war Jurist aber schämte sich nicht." [He was a lawyer but unashamed]. [*Insert Filbinger case*]

His was a familiar face around Basel. One afternoon he took me along on a visit to Karl Jaspers. It lasted some time. Rolf hero-worshipped the noted philosopher. On another occasion, we stopped briefly in a chocolatier; as his confectionaries were being wrapped he exchanged pleasantries with a stranger who had stepped into the same shop. "Know who that was?" he asked in a teasing way, as we regained the street. "That was Karl Gerstein, the brother of Kurt. He lives here." Karl's sister-in-law Bertha Ebeling had been put down by the Nazis as mentally ill.

Kurt Gerstein was an SS *Obersturmführer* whom Rolf had worked into the story of *Der Stellvertreter*. Not being interested in the Jewish tragedy – it was not even called the Holocaust yet – the name meant nothing to me. Gerstein claimed to have visited the Nazis' Belze killing site in Poland in the summer of 1942, and he later headed the *Abteilung für Schädlingsbekämpfung* at Auschwitz, which received the ominous shipments of cans of Zyklon B for "pest control" (*Entwesung und Entseuchung*). Imprisoned by the French in 1945, Gerstein had gone mad and supposedly killed himself, though not before writing several lurid manuscripts on his experiences.³

Our supposed political beliefs did nothing to encumber our relations. Rolf was a salon socialist, but lived only in the wealthiest parts of town. When his career obliged him to move to Vienna,

he lived a few hundred yards from the Burgtheater, in the Burggasse, in fact in the house which had once been Sigmund Freud's. He tried half-heartedly to argue with me about the Third Reich, but his knowledge of British wartime history was stronger than what he knew of Germany's, and after a while he gave up.

He was noticeably paranoid and nervous. Early in July 1966, ((when Soldaten had its London premier (??)) he came to England for what was to prove his one and only visit. I wrote a whole-page profile of him for *The Evening Standard*. He stayed with us in Paddington. Since my father was (still•?) occupying the guest room (*I thought he returned after Jutland was finished?*) we bedded Rolf down in our drawing room for a few days. At two o'clock one morning I had occasion to go in and look for a file – Rolf jack-knifed bolt upright in bed, terrified and shouting with fear at this unexpected intruder. "What is it? Who are you! What do you want!" He was pathologically fearful for his own safety, having convinced himself that the British secret service was a bunch of murderers.

After a while it struck me as quite normal when he transferred these apprehensions to my safety too. I was flying to America, he inquired, with seemingly genuine concern, and had no life insurance?

"*Denk' an die Frau und Kinder, David,*" he cajoled. He kept repeating that warning in his low and doleful voice. "Think of the wife and children!" Eventually – a fresh transatlantic flight was again looming – I relented. The monthly premium would be only some eighty deutschmarks, a little over forty euros now. Rolf Hochhuth was such a good friend, I marvelled. He even procured all the necessary papers and forms, and recommended the Victoria Versicherung, a Germany company – that way it would not be hurt by fluctuations in the exchange rate. I signed everywhere Rolf indicated, and asked to whom the payments should be addressed. "To my father, Fritz (••) Hochhuth," he answered unabashed. His father, he now revealed, was the broker who would set this up. That insurance policy continued to run for over forty years, before it finally vanished, with its accumulated monies, in the chaos caused by my imprisonment in Austria, with only eight years to go before it ma-

tured, fifty years after that impressive little display of Rolf's filial affections.

Rolf refused to heed advice, once he had made up his mind on what he first perceived as the facts. He eventually faced writs in defamation not only from Bickham Sweet-Escott, but from the historian Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, a former MI6 officer, over foolish statements that he had published about them both in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. Trevor-Roper privately urged me to mediate for a simple apology, but Hochhuth was on his high horse and the High Court legal action soon grew over all their heads.

Fearing arrest or worse, he no longer came to the UK. Since he had no assets or income within the jurisdiction, the lawyers also named in their writs the unfortunate translator David MacDonald, son of Ramsay MacD., who was a good friend of us both. Rolf stubbornly refused to climb down. The translator suffered the worst financial consequences, including the loss of his house in Fulham. I had been more prudent, and neither of these plaintiffs – Sweet-Escott or Trevor-Roper – included me in the lawsuits. It was noticeable that when Prchal, the pilot, also sued Hochhuth he did not include me in his writ. It is difficult to see how he could have avoided entering the witness box, and there were then questions he would have had to answer.

It was at about this time in 1967 that Richard Lester directed a film so immensely forgettable that it has taken me several false starts even to remember its title: *How I Won the War*. I'm sure that Michael Crawford, its star as Lieutenant Goodbody, would also wish that film were far, far away. Universal Artists, its makers, sent it to Germany, and their public relations wizards decided it needed more relation to the public; they planned to achieve this in Munich, Berlin, and Hamburg with ponderous on-stage discussions involving Lester, Crawford, and two other notables – their gaze having alighted on the serious playwright Rolf Hochhuth and serious war historian, myself.⁴ The one week tour of Germany passed in a tinselled glaze of hotels endowed with more stars than Hermann Göring, in limousines, accompanied by limitless expenses and hired crowds

of squealing teenagers (at Hamburg airport) rented by the front-age-yard and directed to squeal exclusively for Mr Crawford and to ignore Mr Hochhuth and myself. I sat next to Crawford on several stages with Rolf and Lester; latter's long, lank hair and totally bald pate suggested to me that perhaps he should really have been named Silas.

I really liked Crawford. While in Berlin I took him through Checkpoint Charlie for an afternoon to tour the Russian sector, which I knew well. He was round-eyed at the presence of squalor and the absence of glitz; or at the absence of squealers; or at something, it was hard to tell – he was such a good actor.

My own abiding memory of that tour is disagreeable. It is of an episode in Hamburg. Somebody suggested we squander United's remaining funds on a night out in Saint-Pauli; blessed with only the most innocent notions of the Reeperbahn, I went along – I suspect that Rolf was rather more worldly wise. I found myself sitting with an audience in this inexplicably darkened room, petrified, while this almost naked young female decided to plant herself on my lap without so much as a by-your-leave, and flapped and flopped herself in my startled face while on stage another female, wearing even less, namely nothing at all, demonstrated with a male accomplice different employments for a champagne bottle that would not have otherwise occurred to me. Back in Paddington the next day, hollow-eyed from the lack of sleep, I had to face the music, explaining all this to the same very Catholic-prudish wife as had, with no less righteous indignation than mine, flounced out of *The Pawnbroker* not many months (••) before. It was Rolf's fault, I said.

ROLF suffered a lot over the years because of our friendship. It was for ever being rediscovered, and forgotten or forgiven again; then discovered again, and finally not forgiven. Early in the 1980s he showed me a postcard he had just received from the historian Golo Mann, formally ending their friendship. The third son of the famous German novelist and traitor Thomas Mann, who had done for the Americans in World War II what William Joyce did for the Nazis, Golo had accosted him at Basel railroad station and given

him a rather Victorian ultimatum to stop seeing Irving. Rolf had not complied; I was rather proud of that.⁵

Over the years our friendship continued, though at increasing range as I travelled the world and he remained in Switzerland. I was his guest in Basel several times, though in hotels so long as Dana ruled the roost. A breakfast waiter at the Rhine-side Hotel Greub offended us: "You can always buy bread in town if you don't like ours," he snapped as we remarked mildly on the staleness of that morning's offering. Rolf moved us at once into a luxurious hotel downtown and never used Greub again. I repaid him in kind, introducing him to my eclectic circle of acquaintances like the sculptor Arno Breker in Düsseldorf [and Schroeder in Munich]. Breker was one of the century's greatest sculptors, but as with Leni Riefenstahl his career was permanently blighted by having worked in the Nazi era. The activist Lea Rosh tried unsuccessfully to have the sculptures by this modern Michelangelo (••) covered for the 2006 World Cup football championship; given the choice between this unlovely agitator and one of Breker's sculpted goddesses there is small doubt which even the most hardened German would choose today. Breker's art celebrated a renaissance (••) in 2006, with a major exhibition in Rostock, visited by thousands of ordinary Germans.

Over the years, we remained in touch, but did not meet again. After the libel actions nothing would persuade Rolf to visit England again. Partly, he feared arrest for not having come to the High Court (which was absurd, as no contempt was alleged); but it was partly from a sense of indignation. The British press had displayed less deference toward him than did the German at that time. We maintained contact until I was in turn banned in 1993 from setting foot in Germany by a spiteful Bavarian official. Eva Menasse, a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* journalist, wrote a baffled column about our friendship during the Lipstadt trial in 2000 – it had turned up in the court documents. In 2005, on the fortieth anniversary of our first meeting, I spoke with him for half an hour – it was January 26 (••); it was that kind of event.

Later that year (March 2005) he fatefully praised me in an interview with the conservative weekly *Junge Freiheit*, and this time

he was not forgiven. He was on the eve of his seventy-fifth birthday, April 1, 2005, and was recognised as the Grand Old Man of the theatre; he actually owned the Berlin ... Theatre, but hell in Germany now had no greater fury for any person who dared praise me.

A furious media row broke upon his head. The prominent publishing firm Deutsche Verlagsanstalt had prepared his auto(?)biography. It was already printed; now it was pulped. So was a *Festschrift*, that uniquely Teutonic [*Erguss*] artefact, (••), to which all his friends and sycophants had contributed. *Sic transit gloria*. The traditional enemies were apoplectic, remorseless – and *konsequent*. One day I hope to discover by what hidden mechanisms they conduct their vendettas. Travelling through Basel from London to Vienna on November 10, 2005, I wrote him that I hoped to visit him, as will be seen; but his third wife had just died and he had removed permanently to Berlin shortly before.

(Endnotes)

- 1 The United States appeared as *The Deputy* (New York, 1964, trans. Richard and Clara Winston.)
- 2 Tynan's published diaries begin in 1971 and contain no reference to me, I am told
- 3 Henri Roques. Cite his books. ••
- 4 *How I Won the War* (1967) with Michael Crawford, John Lennon, Jack MacGowran, Michael Hordern, Jack Hedley, directed by Richard Lester.
- 5 The problem with Golo Mann had begun in 1981, according to my diary. "October 3rd, 1981 ... 8:20 pm spoke with Dana. She said Golo Mann has written to Rolf a big letter today, attacking me – "He has a David Irving complex which he is trying to fasten onto Rolf as well," said Dana. 10:20 pm Telephoned Rolf Hochhuth at Basel. ... Has Dana told me of the *Briefwechsel* with Golo Mann, who is furious with Hochhuth for his friendship with me?"