

The Pen

THAT summer (1965) we spent in northern Spain. That is, Pilar went on ahead by car with Norah, the maid, Josephine and little Pilar. I followed some weeks later.

Josephine had been born at St Mary's in Paddington; Pilar at St George's, Hyde Park Corner. Both hospitals were already overrun with foreigners in both staff and wards as the Empire had imploded, not of course that their mother was not equally a foreigner.

The resulting Babel, the turmoil bordering on mayhem, persuaded us to move for the third confinement to Asturias, in northern Spain, where her sister lived. It was a marvelous decision. The private clinic at Somío was so very different from the U.K. experience; the nuns were stern but quiet, and well trained, the clinic clean and professional, and the eventual cost remarkably low. Fathers were encouraged to sleep in the same room, though they could not attend the actual birth.

My mother had gone out to Spain to summer with them, flying for the first time in her life, while I wrote on in London.

A few days before I rejoined the family, as Pilar's time was coming near, Mother returned to England. I don't think this was more

than just chance, though I have sometimes fretted over it in retrospect. When I visited her cottage a few months earlier, she had put her hand affectionately on my knee and before I knew what I was doing I brushed it irritably aside. It is only when you become a parent yourself that you realise how wounding such an unthinking action can be. But – if readers have not already begun to anticipate, like the sinking of those ships in PQ.17, what is about to follow – let me add that she had a very happy last summer. She spent it in Asturias armed with her watercolors and sketchpad, painting children and parents on the broad public beach at Gijón. It must have been just like old times for her, when we all went down to Southsea during and after the war.

The third child came on August 17, 1965 and I can still hear Pilar's sister Paloma, who had married a wealthy mining engineer, exclaiming, "*Otra niña!*" – another daughter, and I would not have wanted it any other way. We named the newcomer Paloma; she was as dark-haired and Latin as her sisters were blond and blue-eyed; her eyes were languid and deep brown, she was very different in temperament too, taking after her mother, except that she started off unaccountably shy and bashful and stayed that way for the next decade or so.

Mother was no longer in Spain when Paloma was born, and she came up to London to see her new grandchild a few days after we drove back in October. We were still living in the ground-floor apartment in Paddington. She sat on the sofa, holding the new baby on her lap, and chatting with Josephine, who was now two, and spooning ice cream into her. I remarked that William Kimber had commissioned a book from Father on the Battle of Jutland, to be published on its fiftieth anniversary in May 1996.

"Did they already pay him anything?" she asked, with a sigh. "He is going to harm your name," she predicted. "He'll never deliver. If only he would see one thing through in his lifetime."

I had a copy of *The Destruction of Dresden* on my lap, which she had not seen. I think she was more than a trifle hostile to the book, because when I told her of the fine press reviews she sighed again

and quoted: "What is this viper I have nurtured unto my bosom?" I wanted to read out to her, in the way that authors do, a paragraph of which I was quite proud; but I found now that it had vanished – it was the first time I had noticed that Kimber's had arbitrarily chopped off closing paragraphs to fit chapters into economic page-lengths. Ignoring me, she continued to spoon ice cream into Josephine. I gave up, and tersely snapped the book shut. "You never have taken the slightest interest in what I do," I said. I think those were the words. It's not the kind of thing you forget afterwards.

She left around nine p.m. for the Tube ride back to Ongar. I could have driven her. The little Anglia was right outside. I offered to drop her off at Maida Vale station, and she breezily declined, saying the walk would do her good. How cruelly all these details cling to ones memory. I remember I had wanted to tell her that now my financial future as an author seemed assured, I would start supporting her at last. Her years of sacrifice for us were over. My mind flipped back to the first harvest in Essex; when I was twelve I had earned over three pounds for the first week's work, and was so proud when I gave it all to her. Two weeks later I had secretly paid her phone bill, which I knew had been worrying her; I don't think she ever noticed. I wanted to tell her all this now, but never got round to it, because of that damn' ice cream.

She did not phone the next day, but something odd happened in the evening, for which I have neither sought nor found an explanation, nor shall I receive one this side of eternity. Pilar had gone out and I was alone with the children. At eight p.m. I suddenly heard her in the street, shouting *my name* in alarm at the top of her voice. I ran straight out into the avenue. It was dark and deserted, save for a lone policeman strolling toward me from the direction of Maida Vale.

"Evening, Sir."

Baffled, I called out: "Did you just hear a lady crying out? Screaming in fact?"

"Screaming, Sir?" I knew from his answer that he had heard nothing.

"Yes, my name – David. Sorry, I could have sworn —"

It was so odd, so real, that I wrote it in my diary at once.

Toward midnight Carol phoned with the news. Out in Essex, our mother had collapsed riding her bicycle to an art club that evening; a kindly motorist had picked her up, but she had wakened just long enough to say that she felt most unusual, and died in his car on the way to Epping hospital.

John and Nicky were both serving overseas with the RAF in what little remained of the Empire, so the sad duty of identifying fell upon me.

There was something unusual about my oldest daughter, and we still did not know what. Josephine had a very special kind of brain, about which I will tell more later. As for mother's mediaeval cottage at Ongar, it stayed in John's hands and then went into those of his offspring; we often drove down there afterwards with my children crammed onto the back seat, to leave flowers in the cramped and windswept churchyard up the hill.

After three or four years, little Josephine – far and away the most observant of my daughters – piped up as we accelerated out of Epping toward Ongar, "Daddy, you always turn your head and glance down that same lane as we drive past. I've seen you do it before," she added accusingly.

At the end of the lane, to the right, you could just make out the flat windowless brick hut, the one with the marble slab. "It's where I last saw your granny," I said, and that was the mistake I had made.

What I had viewed, lifeless, cold, and immobile on that slab in a heartless mortuary, was so unlike any memory that I had retained of Mother while alive, that my first brief instinct had been to rejoice, to exclaim to the constable standing stolidly next to me that perhaps there had been some awful mistake – this was somebody else's bereavement and not ours: she was still alive somewhere, and always would be. The image of death, the fixed and rictus smile, was so potent and omnivorous, however, that it swallowed all else that had gone before.

I resolved never to make this mistake again.

THE first member of Hitler's private staff that I visited [•• when?] was Otto Günsche. He had been Hitler's SS adjutant from about 1935, with interruptions for front-line service, until literally the very last minutes of his chief's life. Günsche was a very private person and did not normally speak to writers.

My own good fortune came about like this. Knowing that we were short of money – Josephine was born in 1963, her sister Pilar the year after – William Kimber had asked me to report on the memoirs of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. Keitel, chief of the German High Command (the OKW), had written the manuscript while awaiting execution at Nuremberg. I reported that the memoirs were unexpectedly solid; I felt they were of historical importance, as they cast light into areas that only Keitel could know about. They were written with some remorse for his role in having allowed himself to be the co-signatory of some of the war's more questionable orders. Kimber invited me to translate them.

Translation was not an easy task, as I soon discovered; but Mr Kimber guaranteed to pay me £200 for the job, and we needed that cash badly. It was not much money even in those days, but not chickenfeed either; and not having behind me a father who made his millions in the Kentucky Fried Chicken business, I could not sniff at any source of income.

The job eventually took about three months. Not really anticipating what an arduous task it is to write a proper, literary, translation of a book (as opposed to the kind of parquet-floored wordsludge that a Professor Richard Evans might call a "translation") I accepted the task, and many months later I turned in the finished typescript at Kimber's Knightsbridge offices.

Reading the galley proofs, he affably pointed out that it seemed to contain omissions, marked in the text with the usual ellipses. I undertook to find out what had been removed, and I contacted the German editor, military historian Walter Görlitz; he confirmed that some passages had been left out of the German edition, as they were considered to be politically incorrect – stuff like the entire Battle of Britain and so on. "The British are now our allies," he explained. This was not good.

“Can we get them back, David?” asked Kimber, pouring more of his anæmic China tea into the delicate porcelain cup he placed in front of me. “Would the family let us put it all back in, d’you think?”

I knew that a daughter had married Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg’s son. I located Keitel’s son Karl-Heinz, an army colonel. He was living outside Cologne, and I arranged to visit him with Pilar. He was delighted.

In fact he was so pleased that I was going the extra mile, that he did four things for me: First, he gave me photocopies of the missing passages of the memoirs, the original typescript, including all the bad bits which the German editors had crossed out; second, he provided copies of his father’s prison diary and letters, which I was able to use for a much later book, *Nuremberg, the Last Battle*. In his own diary of his visits to his father in Nuremberg prison just days before the execution, he recorded his father admitting: “*Jawohl*, I know it was wrong. But either we won, or it was all over for the German nation anyway.”¹

The letters described the prison conditions; these shocked me as he was already sixty-four (later, four years older than the field-marshal was, I was subjected to conditions no better as a political prisoner in Vienna). The third thing he did was to open a large oaken peasant-style cupboard which dominated their sitting room, poked his hand up to a concealed ledge above the door, and brought down the fabulous bejeweled, velvet, platinum-and-gold field-marshal’s baton encased in red velvet, that was hidden there from the occupation authorities and now from the German police. It can be seen in the photographs of Keitel at major military parades.²

Finally, Colonel Keitel asked, “How would you like to meet Otto Günsche? He lives just down the road from here.”

Günsche? I was surprised to hear that he was alive. I had assumed him long dead. He was the loyal adjutant and *Sturmabführer* who had stayed with Adolf Hitler until the very last moment, and had carried the lifeless body of Eva Braun up the winding staircase into the Chancellery Garden on the afternoon of April 30, 1945,

before pouring gasoline over her body and that of Hitler, and tossing a flaming torch onto them.

An evening or two later (*check diary* ••) Colonel Keitel walked over with me there to see him. “Otto, this is Mr Irving. He is the Englishman who wrote the book on Dresden”.

I could hear an almost audible click as if a key had turned to open a lock. Having written that book was the key. It satisfied more than one of Hitler’s private staff that I was one Englishman whom they could trust to be even-handed. They had no faith in their own historians at all. I have tried not to betray their trust, and I believe that I reflected fairly all that they told me.

After that first meeting, Günsche gradually recommended me to the Inner Circle of Hitler’s staff and officers; most of them were still alive at that time and had never spoken about what they knew: but I was the Englishman who had written that book about Dresden, said Günsche; and I was the one who had gone the extra mile for the late field marshal’s memoirs.

After the war ended, Otto Günsche had spent ten years in Soviet gulags; he had never spoken to any outsider about those times either.³ This first evening he sat down and talked briefly. I arranged a proper interview for a few days later, [*date* •• ?], and returned with my Grundig recorder.¹

He was now the chief executive of a pharmaceutical manufacturing company outside Cologne. “We old SS men have all done rather well,” he began innocently, adding the observation that this was probably a natural consequence of the selection process through which SS officers had gone. I set up the TK1 reel-to-reel tape machine on his polished boardroom table, and recorded several hours of that conversation. I still have the reels of tape; or rather I had them, until they were seized along with all my other possessions in 2002.

He described in some detail his earlier years working for Hitler, displaying quite obviously his undimmed affection for the Chief;

1 Many international newspapers covered his death on October 2, 2003.

and then we came to the day of Hitler's death itself. Hitler had sent for him that morning, he said, and had disclosed his intention of "departing this life" together with his new bride Eva at about three o'clock that afternoon. He charged Günsche with completing the funeral arrangements, which consisted primarily of obtaining 200 litres of gasoline from the motor pool because, as Hitler put it, "I do not wish the Russians to find any trace of our remains. I don't want to be put on display in some Moscow panopticon."

He instructed Günsche to wait a few minutes after he had heard the shots, and then enter the bedroom. Hitler said, "If you find that either of us is not yet dead, you must finish us off with your service pistol."

Günsche told me it would have been the hardest job of his life, but he indicated sombrely that it proved not to have been necessary. Studying his body language, I found myself being slightly unconvinced on that score.

He carried Eva's body upstairs himself, wrapped in a rug. (I thought he said it was a *spiral* staircase up the exit tower into the garden, but Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary, has written that it was not.) When he returned to Hitler's chamber, he noticed that his own uniform jacket was smelling strongly of the cyanide which Eva Braun had swallowed to kill herself.

Heinz Linge had meanwhile picked up the body of Hitler, wrapped it in a grey blanket, with his polished black shoes protruding, and carried it upstairs to the garden. They slopped the gasoline over the two bodies, and tossed a blazing paper torch on to them.

I pressed Günsche to tell me more. He took my chequered paper and drew in ink the layout of the room, and a sketch of the two bodies where they had been sitting – Hitler slumped in a chair in the corner of the room, Eva Braun lying on the couch with her head on his shoulder, her knees drawn up, her shoes kicked off on to the floor. There was a trace of moistness in his eyes as he recalled these details.

There were two guns lying on the floor near Hitler's feet, he recalled. The Chief had evidently held one in each hand, while he simultaneously bit into the cyanide capsule. I later saw *Life* magazine

photographs, published in July 1945, of two GIs visiting the Berlin bunker and examining the couch by candlelight, with the blood trickle still visible at one end, so there was no doubt that Hitler had actually shot himself. “I examined the guns,” said Günsche. (•• *check transcript*). “One had been fired, and a new round was already in the breech. I unloaded both of them, and handed them to Artur Axmann, the Leader of the Hitler Youth, who had just come in.”

He softly added that Axmann had retained the gun as a memento; there is some reason to believe that his family has it still. It would be worth many millions on the American auction market.

“I looked around for a memento for myself. As we would probably be taken prisoner by the Russians, I just picked up the black fountain-pen off Hitler’s writing desk,” he said. “It was the one he had signed all his orders with. When I went into Soviet captivity, it was taken away from me, but it was given back each time I was transferred from one gulag to the next.”

When he was repatriated in about 1956, the Russians gave all his belongings back to him, including The Pen which had crafted Europe’s history.

“I still have it now,” he said, and produced it from his inside pocket.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Karl-Heinz Keitel’s notes on a talk with his father, Sep 25, 1946.
- 2 Wilhelm Bodewin Johann Gustav Keitel, born Sep 22, 1882, executed at Nuremberg Oct 16, 1946.
- 3 Transcripts of his extensive interrogations with manservant Heinz Linge are in the Hitler file which the KGB compiled for Joseph Stalin (File etc NUMBER••); the contents are sometimes fanciful. I have donated a complete set to the Institut für Zeitgeschichte archives.