Burning bright

WHAT earthly spectacle can compare with the satanic beauty of a steel mill at full blast? By day towering plumes of water vapour stand above the cooling ponds where the glowing ingots have been quenched; by night both town and valley are illuminated by sudden shafts of light, hued from a vivid living orange to a dazzling white, as furnace doors are briefly opened, or as liquid steel gushes from the furnace into the waiting crucible [*Pfanne*]. I had seen these images in photographs and film. Yet nothing could really capture the scene in all its rush of smell and noise and vibration and light, in all its depth and glory.

Steel: it is the stuff of suspension bridges, locomotives, girders and engines of war. Here it is reduced and defeated by man and his muscle to an obedient flowing river of molten elements. An ordered pandemonium filled the halls in which this daily combat took place – searing heat and haze, a low heavy rumble that one felt rather than heard. Demag gantry cranes hauled the two-hundred ton crucibles away to the foundries, to the accompanying whine of electric motors, the grating screeches and clangs of metal on metal,

and whistles and shouts – telling that somewhere in there were human beings, too. Each time I saw it, I felt it needed the music of Richard Wagner, and Siegfried, and Mime's anvil, to complete the scene and setting. The halls were dark, and the haze inside them was blue-grayed by artificial light both day and night.

In halls of such a size, we workers were mere dwarfs. We worked around the clock, manning the six Siemens-Martin furnaces that ranged the length of the main gallery. They were voracious, demanding beasts; they never stopped smelting; they never paused until they died, and even then they were allowed only briefly to cool their bricks and rest their bones until mortals could safely step inside them, reline them, and start the whole process again. We human beings fed these hungry brutes on scrap metal pushed into their mouths by steel magnets or cranes; and with freshly brewed pig iron brought over in crucibles on flat-top railway wagons from the blast furnaces at Duisburg's nearby Ruhrort plant; we tipped in solid lumps of manganese and all the other ingredients needed for that day's batch of steel, tossing these blocks of metal and stone into the cauldron, like spices, to satisfy the raging beast within.

The steel inside the furnace belly was heated to over 3,500 degrees Fahrenheit by a constant searing, roaring flame of oil burning in pure oxygen.. I was Third Smelter on the furnace stage, *III. Schmelzer auf der Ofenbühne*.

Between us and the white hot liquid steel inside was a foot-thick water-cooled electric door; we were required to drink gallons of peppermint tea every day, made with boiling water drawn off a tap on that door. From time to time this was inched open, just a fist high, to let us ladle out a sample and tip it into a pot, which was whisked by pneumatic tube across the works to the labs for analysis. If the lab said the mix was right, the foreman shouted *Abstich!* into a loudspeaker, a klaxon sounded, and the real climax of this nightly drama began – the tapping of the furnace.

THE Thyssen steelworks has now vanished, a victim of European Community economics. But for years after working there, I would look out of the train windows as we rolled through the Ruhr, past

the crucibles waiting on rail sidings, and gaze through the open hall door and occasionally even catch this very moment of the *Abstich*.

Each furnace was tapped at roughly seven-hour intervals, and what a spectacle it was – the heat, the intensity, the noise. On the stage side of the furnace, our gang had to hold a long, solid steel bar, perhaps twenty feet long and two or three inches thick, like a heavy lance, with one end ready by the furnace door. Another man stood on the narrow gallery at the front, above the waiting empty crucible, holding a steel pipe hissing oxygen, and wielding it like a blowtorch. Its end caught fire like a sparkler in the pure oxygen. Using it as a skewer, and hiding behind an almost opaque blue glass face shield and wearing an asbestos apron, he rammed the blazing pipe into the throat at the front of the furnace, to clear the plug that held back the molten metal. At the same moment we opened the furnace door just a few inches and began ramming the steel bar right through the melt to punch the plug out from within.

The front man holding the bar and nearest to the door had no time to wear asbestos; within a few seconds his hair and clothes began to singe, and he quit and rotated to the back. Each man in turn shuffled forwards toward the slit until the radiating heat drove him away, the gang rhythmically ramming the steel bar the whole time until the bung broke free. A dazzling light bathed the whole hall, from end to end, perhaps a mile long, as the molten steel began to flow out. The light grew more intense, as in some Biblical revelation, as the lengthening river of molten steel cascaded into the crucible in a fountain of dazzling sparks; at last the whole hall lit up as bright as day. What mortal could fail to catch his breath each time this display occurred!

When the furnace was empty, a traveling crane hoisted up the overflowing crucible, spilling slag off the top and belching clouds of sulphurous chemicals, and trundled along the gallery above the working men below, to the foundries, where its molten cargo was tipped into rows of forms to make crude steel ingots. Clanking conveyor belts carried each ingot, quenched in water but still glowing ruby red, over to the plate rolling mills or tube mills.

In the tube mills, hydraulic rams simply punched a central

bore-hole through each man-sized ingot, with noisy brute force. Machinery then drew out these elongated donuts and rolled and extruded them in the *Rohrenwalzwerk* to produce high-pressure, seamless steel tubing, a Thyssen speciality. If I had once idly wondered how the holes got into the tubes, here was one answer.

I don't think I was ever as lonely and friendless in my life as in these first few months in the Ruhr. I asked what time the morning tea break was, and learned that the eight-hour shifts were worked straight through with no formal meal breaks. Language was the main problem. "A"-level German just wasn't enough, and the men never tired of poking fun at my attempts to communicate. A foreman asked me to tell Müller that it was four p.m., "*Sagen Sie dem Müller bescheid*" – go say that fact to Müller. "Four p.m., Herr Müller," I did as bidden, and added as requested, "That fact". "*Bescheid*."

They hooted unkindly, and left me refusing to speak their rotten language for several days in consequence. Over the years that followed, I learned their language fluently, and practiced in countless public meetings, until I commanded an audience of 10,000, and could bring them to their feet chanting my name and applauding. As said, there are always wrong turnings that one can take in life, but one cannot always see them in advance.

Once or twice our foreman, Adolf Saxler, invited me to his home, and we stayed in touch for years afterwards. He invited a friend round too, a veteran and former SS sergeant, who told me of the tough training they went through in the Waffen-SS; crawling under live machine-gun fire was just one routine (he showed me the resulting scars on his pot belly).

I did not drink, so the great Rhineland festivals for Christmas, New Year, and Mardi Gras, left me more miserable than ever. As my German improved, from reading picture captions in *Bild* and in other newspapers, life became more tolerable. Now I could understand the movies. The box office hit in the local cinema was a two-part film version of Thomas Mann's classic 1901 family saga,

Buddenbrooks.

The works had gained the idea that I was to be given a taste of every workshop, and I did time in every hall and shop, from the tube mills and the furnace stage to the numbing boredom of *Muffen andrehen*, tapping threads on to small-bore steel tube and twisting sleeves (••) onto them.

Once, old Fritz Thyssen's widow Amalie was shown around the works; I wrote her a letter, and she replied most kindly, as I recall. I had no money, and I never ate properly, because I simply did not earn enough. At the end of the first month I received no pay at all, so much had been deducted for the regulation steel-capped boots and safety helmet (I kept them as mementoes, and they were finally lost when all my property was seized in May 2002).

There were also the compulsory union dues to I.G. Metall, the metalworkers' union, and I was baffled to see that one-tenth of the income tax siphoned off workers' wages went to the churches; this Church Tax was an imposition about which Adolf Hitler several times ineffectually complained, and which even he was unable to avoid, let alone repeal.

I stayed in touch throughout this time with Pilar in London. Once or twice I took a long weekend and returned by train to see her. I could not afford a berth and kipped down in the heaving, stinking, overcrowded Harwich ferry's saloon. Once an elderly millionaire, a Herr Wallenberg, wearing an overcoat with an Astrakhan collar and traveling first-class from Essen, chanced upon me there and invited me to share his cabin to Harwich. I took the upper berth, and discovered only later what else he had in mind. I returned to the saloon. I had no idea about real life then: Brentwood had not taught us, or me at least, about such people.

For those few happy days of my visits to London, Pilar and I lived on slices of fried bread. I had no money after buying the rail ticket. When I returned to the Ruhr, I had to leave the fine clean room I had rented at the town's Kolpinghaus – which shortly sued me for the pitiful arrears – and move into the Thyssen factory's *Ledigenheim* or bachelor quarters, just outside the works gates, where a cot cost one mark fifty per night. It was a casual domestic

rearrangement which eventually helped to reshape my entire life.

IN this grim dormitory building we steelworkers slept twelve to a room. Since all of us worked to a three-shift *Schichtenplan*, it was less crowded than it sounds, and we seldom saw each other. I daresay I got on their nerves, being the only foreigner. Somebody told me I was the only *Gastarbeiter*, or foreign worker, in the Ruhr at that time; later Germany was flooded with foreign workers, as Chancellor Ludwig Erhard's economic miracle began. There was a radio in the room, and when I was alone in the evenings I listened to classical music until the radio's owner, displeased with finding his station regularly changed, rewired the wall plug and hoped I would not notice.

I did not intend to work there all my life; in fact the three-shift system hardened in me a resolve never again to wake to a metal clapper on an alarm-clock bell. I still felt some kind of higher degree was necessary. Failing that, I might become a writer: I wrote an article on the Ruhr experience and *The Daily Telegraph* published it.[1] I had also contacted University College London, and they replied rather discouragingly that they "knew of my case", and would be willing to accept me for an economics degree, if I could whip up the requisite A-levels in time for the autumn admission: economics, British Constitution, and statistics being required.

I had studied none of these. Pilar sent me from London the books that I listed for her – I don't know to this day where she found the money – and I put my head down into them each evening after coming off shift. My physical energy ran low. A willing and attractive blond German girl [*Heidrun Hasselbring*] visited me, coming all the way from Hildesheim; to my dismay, she had even booked a hotel room for "us" for the night, wearing a midnight-blue homemade dirndl dress with what seemed like ten thousand buttons. By the time I had negotiated all those obstacles, no other part of my frame was functioning, and I remained as pure as before.

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1 David Irving, "Men Behind Germany's Miracle," *The Daily Telegraph*, Sep 6, 1960

I WROTE to Stewart & Lloyd's, Ltd., who had a steel mill at Corby built on the iron-rich limestone of Northamptonshire, and on my next return home I took a train up to see about getting a blue collar job with them – or possibly in their personnel department; they agreed that there might be an opening – after I got my degree. Like the Thyssen works, Stewart & Lloyd's has long vanished, swallowed first by British Steel and later by Corus, and for the same reasons.

My knowledge of German was improving. I read picture magazines and talked more with the other workers. I discovered that, like most Germans, they had two opinions, the politically correct one and the one they expressed in private to their mates on the furnace stage. Their views on the Jews were unflattering. Under a pseudonym [*Peter Steiner*] I wrote an article on the hidden opinions of the German workers I had met; *The Jewish Chronicle* seemed obsessed with such topics, and published it at once.

The oldest amongst my roommates was a graying war veteran from Leipzig, a city in the Soviet zone of Germany. He noticed me reading in *Revue* a war series called "Die Lichter gehen aus über Deutschland" [The lights go out across Germany.] It mentioned briefly a British air raid in 1945, which had killed over one hundred thousand civilians, mostly burned alive, in one night. I had never heard of this episode before. In Germany, as in England, the theme of the Allied saturation bombing raids was taboo.

"I was there," he said, leaning over my shoulder and tapping the page. "Dresden. I was there that night, and it's true."

I HAD probably decided to marry Pilar Stuyck. Before I returned to London in June 1960 (•• ?) to sit those three examinations for UCL, with little hope of passing them, we concluded that she should return to Madrid and I should follow her. While we awaited the exam results – she no doubt hoping for the worst in that respect – I gave up life in the Ruhr and decided to follow her to Spain.

With her working knowledge of English she soon found employment with the AFEX, the Air Force exchange of the American forces based in Spain. In her tight, low-cut flowered dresses she was

as pretty as a pie. She was of good family; when I next visited Madrid I came to know most of them – her mother a hard-working and well respected señora, her uncles either officers in the army, or industrialists, or impresarios (Livinio Stuyck, on whose ranch we often stayed, staged the most important bullfights in Spain, and is commemorated with street-names and a plaque in the Plaza de Toros); the Stuyck family – imported three centuries before as weavers from Flanders – owned the Royal Carpet and Tapestry Factory. Her father, a husky, hunched, quiet-spoken, and clearly ailing man, was a chemist, apolitical and, like most of the Spanish, a heavy smoker.

I set about the hard task of learning yet another language, and this time from the floor up – phonetically, and with great mental anguish, sitting in the corner of many a room or sun-dappled *finca* while the family all around me chattered on in their unintelligible and usually loud Spanish cacophony.

General Francisco Franco's dominion was just celebrating its twentieth year of peace. It was a quiet and tightly ordered society; "recreational" drugs did not exist, kissing in public was illegal, bikinis were prohibited. I took a typing test and won a job as a clerk-stenographer with the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC), based at Torrejón de Ardoz just outside Madrid. I commuted by air force bus each day to the base.

Franco had ordained that the American visiting forces were not permitted to pay non-American employees more than the going local rates, so my salary was 1,200 pesetas a month, just under five pounds. I rented a tiny room in a *pension* two or three streets away from Pilar's home, which was in Don Ramón de la Cruz, an elegant upper middle-class neighborhood of the capital – it was unthinkable in 1960s Spain to live under the same roof before marriage. I boiled the shaving water over an oil lamp each morning. Grey-uniformed, peaked capped night watchmen patrolled the city blocks all night, waiting for residents to clap hands and shout for them – "*Sereno*!" And the *sereno* clacked his long pole on the paving stones to say that he was coming, bringing the keys to unlock the building's street door to let the people in. He knew everybody by

sight. Families were safe then.

My workplace was the American base hospital; stamped across my photograph, my plastic SAC pass proclaimed PEACE IS OUR PROFESSION. Annette, the pleasant forties-something American who ran the office, was paid many times as much as I, but had cultivated an impressive two-year backlog in her work; I cleared it within two or three months, which did not endear me to her. This was the hospital where Tyrone Power briefly lay after he died filming on location in Spain in 1958. She had sneaked into the morgue for a look, and spoke in awe of how handsome he was in death. I was more taken by her IBM electric typewriter; it was the first I had ever seen, and when she was not there I slid behind her desk and used it.

Bilirubin; blood serology! I learned all these words in American – because the doctors dictated their reports over the telephone onto a Dictaphone system that recorded on broad, transparent plastic Dictabelts; the result seemed, and sounded, like something Thomas A. Edison himself had invented.

In the canteen I could view the Americans who manned the SAC strategic bombers – a squadron was constantly in the air, around the clock, as part of the Eisenhower nuclear deterrent, later satirized in the movie *Doctor Strangelove*. The few airmen that I saw impressed me by their uncomplicated mental structure; they read comic books in the canteen, running their fingers along the lines and silently opening and closing their mouths as they read the balloons coming out of the characters' mouths. It is wrong to generalize, but I suppose that in that job, as in Heinrich Himmler's *Einsatzkommandos*, a low IQ was a job-requisite.

THERE I might have remained for the rest of my life, a humble, low-paid stenographer at a military installation eight hundred miles from home.

Occasionally I exchanged letters with Mr Allison, my old headmaster. To Pilar's unspoken dismay however a letter came from London, out of the blue, stating that I had not only passed the advanced-level examinations requested by UCL, but had done so with distinction; either their standards had lowered, or the generally

worldly wisdom arising from my travels had given me an edge over the average candidate. My score had now risen therefore to thirteen A-levels and seventeen O-levels. [•• *check*]; like the Thames Estuary, my knowledge was multi-coloured, broad, and shallow – perhaps the ideal background for a writer. I would return to university in the autumn.

With an almost total lack of enthusiasm on my part, I made tracks for London and a degree course in Economics and Political Science to start in October 1960.