

Transcript of an Execution

It seemed they were all awaiting me. At the *Neue Illustrierte* office, I was swept straight in to see Werner Höfer, a bland, civilized magazine tycoon with pink complexion, white hair, and a toothy smile. Years later it turned out that Höfer was a CIA asset, like *Encounter* magazine's Melvin Lasky (one of his frequent guests on *Frühschoppen*), but I would have neither known nor cared about this at that time. Günter Karweina, one of the magazine's Vietnam war correspondents, and a tough and punchy journalist, was with him.

Höfer asked a few brief questions about my background and family. I was a writer, I said (and why not? For that was now increasingly my intention). My father? He was a *Kapitänleutnant zur See*, he had been at Jutland, I added – the Skagerrak battle. He asked about my work on the Dresden raid so far, then invited me to wait briefly outside.

Bärbel Naporowski, his smiling secretary, brought me a cup of strong coffee. I did not know it at the time, but Britain's cruel bombing of German cities was, by unspoken agreement between Bonn and the Allies, a taboo subject at the time: nobody was allowed to write about it or mention it on television; it had killed

over a million Germans, but no German author dared to mention it. The word Holocaust was not mentioned either.

Being English, I had unwittingly broken through one of these two taboos. Höfer now saw an opening. A few minutes later I was invited back in, and engaged at a fee of one thousand deutschmarks per week to write a series of articles on the Allied saturation bombing of the German cities, expanding my Dresden research to cover every other major city destroyed too – in West Germany, that was, because the magazine would target each city in turn with a colossal sales campaign. Fuelled now with an expense account, I would research the British (and American) end, and Karweina the German. A contract was quickly typed up and signed. Frau Naporowski handed me the first fat envelope with a cash advance inside.

The series was initially contracted to run for thirteen weeks but, following the huge public demand, it ran for nearly forty. My series added a million copies a week to their sales. The articles grabbed the headlines. The taboo was broken. The individual pictures were wonderfully reproduced, spread across two pages at a time – gutted cities, airmen, a doomed American B-17 Flying Fortress seen from above, with one wing torn off by a heavy bomb that has smashed through it from the plane flying in formation directly above; blazing cities, charred victims.

Modern Germany had never seen these awesome photographs. “So starben Deutschlands Städte,” the series was called – that’s how Germany’s cities died; there was not one German whom this brutal war had not affected. The rival magazines like *Quick* and *Bunte* tried to copy the series, but by then we had an unbeatable lead.

WITH that contract signed and in my pocket that day late in 1961, I walked back to Cologne’s central station and bought myself another railway ticket to London. From the station’s post office I sent a telegram to Pilar in Madrid – now I really was a writer, and we could have that proper wedding after all.

I engaged a pleasant young German *au pair* girl, Jutta Padel, as a personal secretary. She would stay with me for over twenty years, help me to my biggest success by personally transcribing Rommel’s

shorthand diaries, and only then reveal a curious secret.

“My father-in-law is in your Hitler biography,” she said one day with the satisfied smile of a cat that has got away with the cream for many years. I shook my head in disbelief, but she insisted. The Nuremberg brain-surgeon she eventually married, and whom I never met, was the son of General Hansgeorg (••) Thomas, one of the anti-Hitler plotters.

Armed now with a steady and substantial income, I moved out of Holland Road and took a short lease on a very pleasant and elegantly furnished apartment in Morshead Mansions, Paddington, for a year.

The Madrid wedding was set down for the cathedral in Goya, a main thoroughfare, late January 1962. There would be many invited guests, as both sides of Pilar’s family were well up in society – she herself had attended the same school as the then Prince Juan Carlos de Bourbon. Her mother’s brothers owned ranches and plantations, and her father’s staged most of the country’s bullfights. Invited later to attend a bullfight in San Sebastian, I blotted my copybook by leaving during the first *lidia*, declaring in English that this was no sport I wished to see; the same would hold for football, but even so the remark did not go down well.

Her father, impressed by the letters she had earlier received from the Ruhr, had welcomed the prospect of a German son-in-law; if his feelings for the English were less warm, they were well concealed. I got on well with her mother; she was blessed with two daughters who had already become nuns, one now a mother superior, even her son, Francisco, was training as a priest. For a time Pilar had been earmarked for a convent too, and their mother’s sense of fulfilment can well be imagined.

For her mother, the excitement of seeing Pilar trying on her wedding dress a week before the ceremony was too much, and she suddenly just sighed and passed away, her heart unable to keep up with the emotions.

Pilar phoned me with this dreadful news in London a day or two later. The wedding must now be cancelled, she explained, or

at least postponed *sine die*, as the whole family was in mourning. Eventually there was a much scaled-down ceremony in the little chapel at the Cathedral's rear on the last day of January 1962.

I had travelled down as usual modestly by train, Fourth Class, and I had intended a no less modest honeymoon, to wit, the rail journey back through Spain and France to London. Pilar announced however that on exploring my trouser pockets – which I found later was a not uncommon uxorial vice – she had discovered more than enough money to pay for a few days at Palma de Mallorca in the Mediterranean.

“It is always sunny there,” she said.

This meant flying of course, and that was the other thing that neither of us had done before. But that ordeal and the others associated with matrimony were eventually surmounted, though memory has it that it rained doggedly for all three days, and it is plausibly alleged that I read the English newspapers throughout.

From our new home in Paddington, Pilar phoned Madrid to report her safe arrival to her father. A servant took the call: “The señora has not then heard *las noticias?*” she said. “Your revered father collapsed and died on the day after the wedding.”

She had lost both her parents, and gained a husband, in the same week. Few marriages can have been dogged by such ill omens at the start, but I can record that it lasted for twenty years, and produced four beautiful daughters, and much happiness almost to its end.

The big magazine series in Germany's *Neue Illustrierte* had begun to appear that November 1961 (••). Based now in Paddington, I travelled by train the length of England, interviewing the airmen and hearing what they had to say. In those weeks the government finally published the Official History, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany*, and its four volumes provided much of the inside story which post-war governments had long kept secret.¹ Seri-

1 Sir Charles Webster and Dr Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany*, four volumes, (HMSO, London, 1961).

ous British newspapers now expressed belated horror about what had been done in their country's name. The official history's dispassionate treatment of the saturation bombing campaign, and its unconcealed criticism of both the Churchill Cabinet and RAF Bomber Command, were a useful prelude to my own inquiries. The publication cannot have pleased the air ministry or the bluff, larger-than-life wartime chief of Bomber Command, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris.

Harris, affectionately called "Bert" by his friends, "Bomber" by the press and "Butcher" by his crews, was, like the German submarine chief Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, one of the great commanders of World War II. He used to say, "I was the only commander called upon to commit my entire first line to battle night after night. I could not have won the war single-handed, but I could have lost it."

Few other commanders inspired the devotion which he did, a sense of duty which compelled his men to go into action again and again, despite knowing that all the odds were against surviving in the long run. Most of the airmen I interviewed knew of Ten-Minute Charlie – that was how long it took for one unfortunate young airman on his first mission to be shot down in flames after crossing into enemy territory. Over fifty-five thousand of Bomber Command's eighty thousand aircrew were killed in action, roughly the same as Dönitz's submarine crews.

Harris was a legendary commander; but he was a killer too and made no bones about it. One story told me by his officers had him driving the wrong way round a traffic circle on the Great West Road to get past a lumbering lorry: a police officer flagged him down and reproached him, "You might just kill somebody like that one day." Harris replied, "Constable, I killed thousands every night."

When Clement Attlee, the post-war prime minister, sent a fractious anti-bombing MP [*Richard Stokes*] down to him to offer amends for his constant carping during the war, Harris, being at that moment enthroned in his WC, sent his manservant to the door: "Tell him that I can handle only one shit at a time," and sent the parliamentarian on his way.

I knew all these stories and more as I rang his doorbell in Oxfordshire on March 23, 1962. I was visiting him by appointment, to the disquiet of the air ministry as it now turns out. I did not know at that time that the ministry had written him warning of my coming; characteristically, he disregarded their advice and welcomed me for a frank talk which lasted all afternoon, and I believe I treated him very fairly in my writing.

His cottage was much larger inside than would have appeared from without. He too was a much bigger man inside than he seemed. He was a monarchist and patriot. Like many a great warlord – Hermann Göring leaps readily to mind – he had played with soldiers when young. He led me over to a bookcase and waved a hand across its main display, a lead-soldier parade of the Queen’s Coronation of June 1953. It occupied an entire bookshelf. (Sir Robert Saundby, his wartime deputy, showed me his own no less impressive collection of rare butterflies, a few days later [*March 27*].)

Harris could not have been more approachable, as he had views about the Dresden raid and Mr Churchill’s role in it which he wanted to air.

[Expand from my note on interview.]

I finally and diffidently put to him the question that others had begun to raise, why had his force not “bombed Auschwitz” – although the very notion shows how little concept those questioners (or I) really had of either the nature of Auschwitz, or the capabilities of a strategic bomber force, or the speed with which the Nazis were capable of repairing buildings and railway lines.

Instead of arguing conventionally, as I had expected, that the proper way to end the barbarism was to win the war, toward which end he was committing his entire force night after night, Harris said simply: “If I were an Auschwitz inmate, given the choice of death by gassing and being burned alive by incendiary bombs, I know very well which I should prefer.”

A year later I sent him a copy of my book on the Dresden raids.

He replied in handwriting on Basildon Bond notepaper that in his view I was an historian “unusually engaged in finding out truth rather than in embroidering inaccuracies and assumptions to make sensation,” which, coming from him, pleased me more than a little.

By that same month, April 1962, I had identified the man who commanded the first wave of the Dresden attack, Wing Commander Maurice Smith. I went south of the Thames to meet him on the day after my meeting with Harris. He was now editor of *Flight International*, a well-known aviation magazine. Dapper, with not a hair out of place above his round and open features, he sat at his desk in a well-pressed pinstripe suit. I have seldom been more impressed by a man of such straightforward manner and evident integrity; perhaps it was just a class-consciousness thing.

As an RAF wing commander in No. 5 Group, he had acted as Master Bomber during the first British attack at nine p.m. on February 13, 1945. He was what the Germans on the ground below called the *Zeremonienmeister*, the master of ceremonies or ringmaster.

I asked Smith if he actually visualised what was happening three thousand feet below him as he circled for half an hour, at extreme range from his base in England, around the city literally directing the bombers this way and that – calling upon them to disregard failed target-indicator (T.I.) markers and concentrate on others – as the first devastating attack developed. He replied convincingly that flying his Mosquito plane at such low altitude and keeping his sense of orientation and transmitting a running commentary to the oncoming bomber squadrons was a full-time job. His concern was to do his job as a professional RAF officer as efficiently as possible. There was a psychological element too – it reassured the lower ranking crews of the main force squadrons to hear the clipped English tones of an officer already on the job, over the target area, encouraging them to press on in.

Smith had his two-inch-thick flying logbook and album lying open in front of him. Dresden was not the only “terror” raid over which he had presided. He and his marker-leader, Flight Lieutenant

William Topper, whom I interviewed a few days later, had brought death to the city of Heilbronn in October 1944, in a firestorm raid which had left 7,027 known dead.

Toward the end of our sober conversation I quietly showed him what I had been saving until then, the photos taken by Walter Hahn – the scenes on Dresden's Altmarkt, with the bodies of women and children, in Mardi Gras costumes, clearly visible, being trampled into layers on the big makeshift pyres. He was silent as he leafed through the pictures. I could see his face becoming slightly flushed, as he pondered what to say. The look, not of shame but of Christian contrition, was so eloquent that I can no longer recall the actual words he used.

He wanted the whole story told; that was plain. He handed over to me that afternoon three rare original documents, which he invited me to use: an aerial photograph of the burned-out city, taken weeks later in March 1945; the actual target map he had used that night, with a cheese-shaped sector carefully marked in white ink, fanning out over the whole of the old city centre (but omitting any railway targets, as it turned out); and a dramatic five (••) page transcript of the wire recording made aboard one of the RAF Radio Link Lancasters, of the brisk, businesslike orders he had radioed as Controller to the 250 bombers once he was satisfied that the red pyrotechnic markers were burning on the right initial point, the city's cycle racetrack.

“Controller to PLATE-RACK Force: Come in and bomb glow of red T.I.s as planned. Bomb glow of red T.I.s as planned.”

“Controller to Marker Leader: If you stick around for a moment, and keep one lad with yellow, the rest can go home. . .”

So the deadpan transcript ran on. No other verbatim script of an execution ceremony survives, so far as I know: but this was just what this was.

Facing page: Somebody begins to spread the rumour that David Irving is an agent of the German governments, East or West, or even of Moscow. The Permanent Under-Secretary at the Air Ministry directs inquiries (From Government files, Public Record Office file AIR.20/.....)

