

## **CHAPTER 6 – London (II) Ham**

THE WATES ESTATE AT HAM was still very much under construction when we moved in. Opposite us in still incomplete "section six" was a show-house cum temporary site office. The company flag flew outside it, raised and lowered at dawn and dusk, which led us to refer to "Stalag Ham six" as if we were in a German prisoner-of-war camp. In fact it turned out to be one of the best modern private housing estates of its kind in London, if not Britain. Now, half a century later, it still looks fresh and clean and boasts a splendid sprinkling of mature trees. It has often been used as a backdrop for TV commercials featuring happy families frolicking in suburbia. It retains a small shopping centre, now complete with tiny Tesco (and including a German deli and bakery), but has long since lost its never very successful, featureless pub. It also has a modern Anglican church with vicarage and an associated primary school, where Chris taught for a while on returning to the profession after Sara's arrival. It is a short walk from the Thames and some lovely riverside views as well as the local stately home, Ham House, run by the National Trust, and there is still a ferry to Twickenham. Ham Common is also nearby with its New Inn and pond, and beyond that the Ham gate to Richmond Park, in my view London's finest. We lived at 224 Ashburnham Road for almost exactly four years.

Public transport facilities were poor, however, which helped to make it affordable, but meant a lot of time travelling between home and office. I had to take the number 71 bus from the estate to Richmond station and the District line to Hammersmith, where I joined the Piccadilly line to Russell Square, a ten-minute walk from the "ST" office at rundown 200 Grays Inn Road (now rebuilt as the headquarters of

Independent Television News). The 71 bus was so rare that it was known to us as the ghost bus, condemned like the Flying Dutchman's ship to roam forever without reaching a garage, its skeletal passengers chained to their seats... Its replacement, imaginatively numbered 371, is rather less unpredictable. At time of writing I use it to get to my dentist on Ashburnham Road.

Amid the local happy band of *Sunday Times* readers were many families with young children, which meant that Karen, aged three, very soon made friends on the quiet streets (not yet deserted thanks to the fears of today's young parents), which in turn led to meetings with other parents - and in our case several lifelong friendships that survived our eight subsequent years abroad. These included Jack and Eileen Barrett, John and Aileen Dekker, Ray and Ann Rose as well as Keith and Judy Nicol (who knew the Bolands, our Whitley Bay neighbours). More on them later.

Professionally I had "arrived," with a job on a "Fleet Street" newspaper which even in the pre-Harry Evans era enjoyed enormous prestige under Denis Hamilton. The news editor was Michael Cudlipp, scion of a famous journalistic family (when he was promoted to assistant editor he was replaced by Michael Hamlyn). The Insight team was just getting into its mighty stride under the driven Australian Bruce Page. Lew Chester worked for it. Other distinguished Australians on the paper included Philip Knightley, one of the best reporters in the country even before he led the way on the immortal thalidomide investigation, and Murray Sayle, a flamboyant figure who would soon make his name for epic reports from the Vietnam war. The very English Nicholas Tomalin wrote superb copy from the Middle East and elsewhere (and would

die there from a stray bullet). Among the female contributors the columnist and future "bodice-ripper" novelist Jilly Cooper stood out, and Sally Soames was gaining fame as a photographer. Antony (Tony) Armstrong-Jones, Lord Snowdon, husband of Princess Margaret, took pictures for the new-fangled colour magazine, first in its field. All these people and many other talented journalists were already in place when Harold Evans became editor in 1967.

Although it was the first and only time that I was "head-hunted," a compliment I felt I had to accept and did with enthusiasm, I was to be no happier at the ST than I had been on the *Daily Mail* in London. It was also my first and only exposure to Sunday journalism, and with my hard-news background it was difficult to get used to the idea that my paper came out only once a week. You could work on a story for several days only to be pipped at the post by one of the dailies, which could publish any other day of the week. I had been used to coming into the office each morning to be given (or latterly in Newcastle to find for myself) an assignment and left to get on with it. On a Sunday paper the hunt was always on for stories that would last the week. Running stories with "legs" that yielded in-depth follow-ups to be filed on Saturday were highly prized but did not grow on trees. Some of my highly competitive colleagues had tarty tendencies and would hover around the newsdesk on a Tuesday hoping to be noticed and favoured. Although I had gained much professional confidence in the preceding five years, I never became "pushy" and soon found myself left on the sidelines.

Our second child, Sara, was born at home in December 1965, only a couple of months after we moved in to the Wates estate. I was present at the birth, guilty of feeding Chris a generous supply of anaesthetic whisky (something she hardly ever drank before or after). My parents sat downstairs to await developments. Today's medical profession and health' n' safety authorities would have had me arrested, I am sure. Her labour was short and the birth proceeded without complications. Karen's birth in Newcastle, three years less one day earlier, had been rather more difficult, and of course on that occasion I was excluded. It was one of life's unforgettable experiences.

Back in the office, I helped Cal McCrystal, who became a long-standing friend, with a number of crime stories in the bloody London of the mid-sixties involving such East End gangster luminaries as the Krays and the Richardsons, to sufficient effect to be offered his crime-reporting post when he was sent to New York as correspondent. On one unforgettable occasion he and I went to Charlie Richardson's house in Catford for the first interview the gangster *capo* had ever given. We were conducted into a front room decorated with plush, Chinese restaurant-style wallpaper and a showy white plastic bar in the corner. The oddest feature of this room was the scratches at the top of the thick, padded leather lining of the door. I had a mental picture of a prisoner trying desperately to escape, but we found out the scarcely less comforting origin of these strange marks when we were leaving. An unidentified man, fortunately of strong build, appeared in the hall tightly grasping the short lead of a huge Dobermann Pinscher dog, which eyed us silently as we were politely shown to the exit.

In March 1966 I covered a shooting at the Blind Beggar pub in Whitechapel Road east London, when Ronnie, one of the Kray twins, murdered George Cornell, a brutish member of the rival Richardson gang, in front of witnesses in the saloon bar. All the witnesses turned out to have bad eyesight and Ronnie Kray could not be charged, although he and his brother would get their comeuppance within months, an event which took me to New Scotland Yard for the announcement.

Rather more amusing was a coup d'etat - on Alderney, a small member of the Channel Islands archipelago. Grandly styling itself the "States of Alderney", the administration of the island with a population of less than 2,000 split as a result of a clash of personalities. This was the occasion of my first flight, at the age of 26. I do not remember the details, but the chairman was ousted. I could not fail to place my tongue firmly in my cheek in reporting this titanic power struggle. Alderney is rather beautiful, with some lovely beaches and a pleasant little "capital", despite the huge, immovable wartime fortifications built by the Germans, who expelled the entire population during the occupation from 1940-45. The photographer, Steve Brody, managed to get an up-from-under shot of the outgoing chairman on a balcony which featured an extraordinarily prominent nose. A year or two later, in 1969, I took my family on holiday there - and opened an offshore bank account in preparation for going abroad as a foreign correspondent.

*The Sunday Times* also presented me with the unique opportunity of interviewing a horse. I flew over to Dublin and went on to the open country of the Curragh, the main base of Ireland's large and economically important horse-racing industry. I

had arranged to meet the horse, Arkle, one of the most famous and successful racehorses of the late 1960s. Unfortunately his trainer insisted we come to the stables first thing in the morning, when the mounts took their early-morning exercise. An assistant was there with a tray of drinks, or more precisely full tumblers of Irish whiskey. The photographer and I perforce accepted one each to show courtesy to our host. I must have had a strong stomach in those days. Anyway we managed to file a pleasant feature.

I helped out on Insight, the best investigative group in the history of Fleet Street, from time to time on the basis that I knew enough of the language to be able to work in France. I went to Paris with two colleagues in 1965 to investigate the abduction of Mehdi Ben Barka, the Moroccan opposition leader aged 45. It was a thoroughly murky story involving collusion between Moroccan generals and the French secret service, aided and abetted by the Parisian criminal underworld. His remains were at last discovered in 2000 under the biggest mosque in Paris (and the whole of Europe), built in 1984 at the behest and expense of King Hassan II of Morocco. This at last confirmed beyond doubt our published conclusion that he had been abducted in the city while lunching at the famous Brasserie Lipp and then murdered and buried by gangsters. A French security source provided us with secret reports, photocopied with the letterheads masked, over a long and superb meal at a quiet Montmartre restaurant. I was given a brief introductory course on the structure and workings of the French security and intelligence services by an anonymous official at the Ministry of the Interior, a useful sidebar to the main story. The whole affair was worthy of Graham Greene at his most inventive, truth being stranger than fiction in this extraordinary context.

Another auxiliary supporting role for Insight came, a few weeks before I left the ST, with the great insurance fraud perpetrated by the Sri Lankan Dr Emil Savundra. I doorstepped him at his temporary home opposite Hampton Court Palace just as his Fire, Auto and Marine insurance empire collapsed for lack of securities and reserves, leaving 400,000 motorists without legal cover. The missing money had been spent on an egregiously lavish lifestyle. Unhelpfully Savundra did not emerge to address the press mob in his garden but while his door remained closed, those of the very upmarket pub nearby, the Mitre, were obligingly open. Savundra, who had also been involved on the fringes of the "Profumo Affair", the great scandal of 1963 which ended the premiership of Harold Macmillan, was eventually sentenced to eight years for fraud in 1968, served six and died in 1976. It was Insight above all that nailed him, one of their most spectacular investigations.

I had a walk-on part in one of the most memorable stories of 1966 - England's football triumph over West Germany in the World Cup. I drove to the Royal Garden hotel in Kensington, next to the Gardens (heaven knows how and where I found a parking place), to cover the celebrations of the England team and its hangers-on. Almost every second car I passed on the way hooted the rhythmic victory chant as the entire country seemed to succumb to euphoria. A huge crowd was on hand to hail the heroes.

As 1967 began, I realised after a dull period that I had not been sent out of the office on a story for 13 successive weeks. With my low boredom threshold, I found this

increasingly depressing, producing such copy as I did by working on the phone. So instead of accepting the crime reporter offer, I complained to Cudlipp about my incarceration - and asked for a transfer to *The Times*, which the ST proprietor, Lord Thomson of Fleet, had just acquired. Fortunately Cudlipp was about to transfer there himself at the behest of William Rees-Mogg, the deputy editor of the ST now appointed editor of the daily paper as Harry Evans took over the Sunday (Denis Hamilton became editor-in-chief of both titles). Cudlipp was to become home editor or managing editor (news) - I forget his initial title. Anyway he agreed and so did John Grant, then *The Times* new editor, soon promoted to home editor.

So I left the ST without regret on Saturday February 4, 1967, and turned up at *The Times's* more modern office in Blackfriars - New Printing House Square - on Monday the 6th. I was able to follow up my last Sunday story as my first for the daily, about the dismissal of the director of a Teesside redevelopment plan - not my most memorable report but quite controversial at the time. I was assigned to the News Team, a new grouping of six reporters with two roles - investigative features and big stories that needed several reporters to cover them - "grope journalism" as one wit described it. We were given parking permits for the paper's underground garage, which meant I could drive to work, a luxury indeed. And if I went in by public transport, I took the District line from Richmond directly, if slowly, to Blackfriars tube, opposite the office.

The News Team was led by Peter Evans, previously home affairs correspondent, who was good at taking the broad view. His deputy was Colin Webb, a former army



captain whose strength was administration and who later took over from Peter. The original six also included Stephen Clarke, an Oxford intellectual and classic *Times* recruit, Garry Lloyd, an experienced hard-news reporter, and Michael Knipe, whose arrival was delayed as he served out his notice on *The People*, a Sunday title almost as well known as the *News of the World* for its old-fashioned, muckraking investigations. As we got into our stride, more and more of the writing fell to me. Julian Mounter, Stephen Jessel and Michael Hatfield would soon join the team as reinforcements and/or replacements.

I got involved with in-depth coverage of such social issues as adult illiteracy and missing persons - an amazing variety of in-depth and/or big stories. From time to time, and with increasing frequency, I went on solo assignments abroad. One early excursion was to Holland, where I looked into the seething row between progressives and conservatives in the Roman Catholic church, which soon became a worldwide issue. The resulting piece carried my personal byline for the first time, a portent as it turned out for a shift towards foreign news, for which my appetite was mounting. I was becoming a semi-detached member of the News Team, on the way to emerging as a formally classified special correspondent, or "fireman" as the trade called it - a misnomer as one was more likely to add fuel to the flames of upheaval than to put them out.

The team looked into British exports to North Vietnam, which annoyed the US government, then sinking into the mire of the Vietnam war. One of the biggest and most absorbing probes we did was the revelation of a European clandestine network

helping and shielding US deserters from Vietnam. I made the running on this story, spending time in Sweden and France talking to deserters and those helping them. There was more Graham Greenery here, with me arranging to meet network organisers at the Brasserie Lipp cafe in Paris, the home from home of i.a. Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, for which occasion I arranged to be recognised by sporting a copy of the handily pink *Financial Times*. I was driven blindfolded across Paris to an apartment building where I interviewed a couple of the organisers round an open door, a man and a woman. The latter christened herself Molly Bloom, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. A few years later I met her face to face in Germany. She was an American radical called June and had a Dutch surname. Her male ally was called Max, who kept in touch with me at the same period from his refuge in Australia. I never established his true nationality, probably German. Both were paranoid.

The year 1968 was an *annus mirabilis* for me. Early in the year the News Team investigated black unrest and protest in Britain, Africa and the United States, the latter falling to me. So my first rather odd exposure to America lasted a month, during which I toured ghettos such as Harlem in New York, Detroit, Atlanta and rural Georgia, including a place called Social Circle, where a fortunately peaceful but spectacular demonstration was going on against school segregation, in which black mothers surrounded a high school and then sat down in the dusty streets. In preparation I interviewed the notorious radical black leader Stokely Carmichael, whom I pursued through Copenhagen and Stockholm before catching up with him at Uppsala university. I had Martin Luther King to myself for 90 minutes on a flight from Heathrow to Newcastle, where he was to receive an honorary degree - the only moment in his British schedule that was free for such a purpose. The News Team

produced a massive series and also a book, *The Black Man in Search of Power*, which listed the writers by name. I contributed the three chapters on the US.

Shortly afterwards I wrote a long article about black-rights campaigning in the US under my byline - and the *Times* syndication service sold it to *De Tijd*, still my father's paper in Amsterdam. He had finally returned to Holland after 22 years as London correspondent in 1967, his health already deteriorating (I accompanied him and my mother on the route from Liverpool Street to Harwich and the Hook of Holland, reversing our shared journey of 1945). This piece provided us both with some amusement, as the readers did not seem to notice that the byline was "Dan van der Vat" rather than Daan. He was even stopped on the street to hear indignant or sceptical remarks from colleagues and friends, and even readers, about how he could possibly be in two places at once. Eventually *De Tijd* sensibly took to giving me my byline with "Jr" added.

My byline had appeared on a large feature about Che Guevara, the Argentine/Cuban revolutionary and literal poster-boy (to this day) of radical students worldwide, who was captured and killed in October 1967 (I wrote his obituary). When Martin Luther King was assassinated early in April 1968, it fell to me as the person who had seen more of him in private than anyone else in Fleet Street to write his obituary too.

From 1967 the News Team took an interest in the running sore of Ulster, starting with a massive expose of gerrymandering and other political dirty tricks in Northern

Ireland. I would not presume to claim *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, but the huge article was followed by the first civil rights protests by the Catholic/Irish-Nationalist minority in the province, which escalated into "the Troubles" that went on for so many years. I spent weeks in Ulster, an eye-opener indeed. At the outset I contacted a number of people I planned to interview, including Gerry (later Lord) Fitt, of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), whom I asked not to mention that my colleagues and I were coming. By the time we arrived in Belfast, the news that *The Times* was probing political injustice was all over the city! The moderate SDLP Catholic/Nationalist party would soon be outbid on the protest front by Sinn Fein, the republican movement that originated in the campaign for Irish independence. It had murky links with the Provisional IRA, soon to show its bloody hand in killings, shootings, bombings and organised fundraising crimes, both in the unhappy Province and in mainland Britain. It was only when the Good Friday Agreement came into effect at the end of 1999, over 30 years after my first foray there, that the "Troubles" were held to be at an end (if never 100 per cent).

I arranged to meet a local councillor in a bar in Dungannon and got there early, to find the place open but empty. A voice, source unseen, loudly demanded, in the thickest of Ulster accents, "Mine's a pint of Guinness," repeated several times until a young barman appeared. There was still no sign of anyone else, but then the barman shifted a cage into view containing a minah bird, reminiscent of the toucan, star of contemporary Guinness advertisements, which once again declaimed: "Maine's a paint of Guinness..."

Looking, on a much later visit, into school apartheid in the province, one of the roots of inter-communal hatred, I met a couple of teachers who asked where I came from. This was one of many occasions when my Dutch name provided useful camouflage in Northern Ireland. Obviously with a name like mine I could hardly be pigeonholed as just a "Brit": to the protestants or loyalists a Dutch name prompted positive thoughts of Orange (as in Orange Order) and King William III ("King Billy") who defeated the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. This event was recalled as if it were yesterday by protestants, just as Cromwell's depredations in Ireland a few years earlier were vividly remembered by nationalists. When I was among Catholics on the other hand, I was able to say, truthfully, that I came from a strongly Roman Catholic family beleaguered by Calvinists in north-east Holland. In the end my time in Northern Ireland powerfully reinforced my distaste for organised religion of any kind.

When I told the teachers that I lived in the London borough of Richmond, they immediately referred with interest if not outright amazement to Christ's School in the town, about which they had detailed knowledge. I told them that Chris had recently begun teaching there, the point of interest for them being that when it opened the school was ecumenical, a joint Anglican-Catholic undertaking (the Catholics withdrew some years later). This was very rare in England, let alone Ireland north or south. They plied me with questions which I answered as best I could, the biter well and truly bit.

Like most visiting journalists, I stayed several times in Belfast's modern Europa Hotel, a frequent target of bombers as well as oddballs of many kinds who had it in for the press and wanted to browbeat us in the bar, or else to tip us off about "events" which seldom happened. Rumours abounded. I remember going out one morning to take a taxi to some interviews. I noticed a bank on a nearby corner, making a mental note to go there for some cash on my return. When I came back, the bank had gone - a mere pile of rubble remained after a bomb had detonated outside. Astonishingly nobody was seriously hurt - the bank had not yet opened when the explosion happened. Walking down the street to the taxi rank on another morning I saw a man holding a camera to his eye who popped out of a side street like a jack-in-the-box and snapped my picture before disappearing. Police? Army? IRA? UDA? I have no idea.

Drinking in Belfast was on a heroic scale, encouraged by the larger standard measures of spirits legally served in the province, a trap for the unwary. One colleague who had a semi-permanent room in the hotel went up to bed and locked his door, only to be awakened in the small hours by an enormous drunk who, despite having to break the lock to get in, would take no persuading that he was in the wrong room. Eventually he passed out, luckily, and his friends appeared to take him away.

I spent some time in (London)Derry, which had an electric atmosphere in its capacity as principal nationalist stronghold. I went to a hotel to interview some Catholic protesters, including the brave, frail figure of Bernadette Devlin, later an MP at Westminster. Shortly after I left a bomb went off in the lift I had been in half an hour

earlier. The marches continued, the protests mounted, the two "communities" attacked each other; the mostly protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary were often caught in the middle and lashed out in frustration.

I was invited to a police station in Belfast by a superintendent I had been cultivating as a contact. When I got there in the late evening, I found myself alone in a room with half a dozen senior officers, most of them in their green uniforms. I had brought a bottle of whiskey to oil the wheels, but the meeting degenerated into a contest in which they clearly wanted to drink *The Times* under the table as they spelt out the very real and dangerous difficulties they faced on the streets. They very nearly succeeded: I have no idea how I got out of there and back to the hotel. I was very fragile the next morning but relieved I had managed to hold my own and not disgrace myself.

I met the roaring Rev. Ian Paisley, the intransigent Calvinist Unionist who hated reporters - especially if he smelt alcohol on their breath (not me, fortunately). I watched, and sometimes got caught up in, marches beloved of the protestant Orange Order and hated as nothing else by Catholics. I met British soldiers who cheerfully admitted they had no idea why they were there or what they could do about the chaos they were inflaming rather than suppressing. It was often difficult to believe that you were in the United Kingdom. Paisley had earlier exported his bigotry to England, specifically Liverpool and its cathedral, where Chris's father, Canon Henry Ellis, had just become Precentor in charge of music. Chris was there when Paisley burst in one day to bellow "no Popery" in protest against the warm ecumenical association

between the Anglican and Catholic hierarchies in the city, specifically between the Anglican bishop of Liverpool and former England cricketer David Sheppard and the Roman Catholic archbishop, Cardinal John Heenan.

Apart from Ulster, the most persistent and far-reaching running story in modern UK history, my News Team colleagues and I were sent on many hard news stories where more than one reporter was required. One of the most memorable was the *Torrey Canyon* disaster in which a huge tanker ran aground off Cornwall and began to leak oil. I flew over the slick in a RAF Sunderland flying boat reconnaissance aircraft. When someone opened a porthole, the stench made all aboard feel sick. It turned out that one of my News Team colleagues, Julian Mounter, had a Dutch mother, so that when we located the pub in Penzance that the Dutch salvage-tug crews of the Smit-Tak company used as a base, *The Times* was serendipitously represented by not one but two Dutch-speaking reporters and we scooped a useful exclusive. Before the wreck could be towed away by these gallant seamen, the RAF sent in Buccaneer bombers (which failed to do more than spread the slick). For an imperishable account of this embarrassing fiasco, I recommend my late colleague Bernard Levin's marvellous history of the 1960s, *The Pendulum Years*. Of the plethora of anecdotes he supplied, the most achingly hilarious was a madcap scheme to stuff the wreck with tennis balls to help it refloat. I was almost ill with laughter.

Other major investigations included an exposé of the regime of the Greek colonels in Athens, masterminded by Stephen Clarke, for which I garnered exiled opposition views in Paris and in Stockholm, where I interviewed the Pasok (socialist) leader



Andreas Papandreou. For this I got a "herogram" from the editor, one of several I received from William Rees-Mogg. Earlier we dug into the abduction of Moïse Tshombe, a Congolese politician, on an aircraft which left Ibiza for Geneva but was forcibly diverted to Algeria. I went to a tax-dodger's refuge, Liechtenstein, where the company that hired the aircraft was registered. Under principality law the company had to have one local resident-cum-citizen on its board, usually a lawyer. I looked up the man, a certain Dr Müller, in his office, whose outer wall was festooned with brass company name-plates, and was met with a stonewall of polite refusals to answer questions. My attempts to get confirmation about the hire of the aircraft led me to pose questions that became more and more byzantine, to no effect. Trying to outwit this seasoned lawyer was a serious waste of time. We left his office together at closing time and as we walked across the car park, I tried one last straight, perhaps despairing, question: did a certain Frenchman contact his office about the hire? "Yes," said the lawyer equably. At last! I contacted the office to pass on the good news to my colleagues. It was also my first exposure to the phenomenon of the hotel minibar, which immediately came under strain as I spent a good hour on the phone, at huge expense.

The biggest hard-news story of 1968 for me was *les évènements* in France, when the entire country seemed to rise in discontent with a convincing imitation of revolutionary fervour. It began with a student insurrection at the Sorbonne university in Paris, where militant students were soon joined by workers from the Renault car company in endless demonstrations and debates of amazing eloquence in the Odéon and other places. The recently formed riot squads or CRS (Compagnies républicaines de sécurité) with their black, SS-style uniforms and ever-ready batons

were met with barricades and barrages of handy cobblestones (these were rapidly tarred over).

Most of the News Team flew to Paris and returned about a week later, only to go back when the unrest resurfaced and intensified. With French airports now closed, it fell to me to fly to Brussels with Charles Douglas-Home, future editor but then defence correspondent, to go to the relief of the Paris office, run by the egregious Charles Hargrove, an amiable snob more French than the French, who was stuck in the city for lack of petrol. So we rented a red BMW at the airport, bought some jerrycans, filled them with petrol, loaded them into the car and set off for Paris. The government of Charles de Gaulle had banned the hoarding of petrol, which was already virtually unobtainable in many areas. Huge fines and lengthy jail terms were in force for hoarders. As we sped south along the eerily empty autoroute, I was at the wheel when I felt a gentle lurching sensation. There ensued a classic English understated dialogue between Charlie and me.

He said quietly, "I think we may have a puncture. Perhaps we should pull over?" I replied: "I'm absolutely sure we've got a puncture, but I don't think I should do anything hasty with a bomb in the back." Meanwhile I carefully lifted my foot off the accelerator to let the car come slowly to a gently yawing halt on the hard shoulder.

We got out. To get at the spare wheel, we had to remove the jerrycans from the boot and lined them neatly at the side of the road. To prevent the jack from buckling under the additional weight we also unloaded the rest of the jerrycans from the back passenger seats and footwells. Soon an embarrassing fuel dump took shape, enough

it seemed for a small army. Then we heard a buzzing noise, soon clearly identifiable as an approaching motorcycle. In the saddle was, of all things, a gendarme, who stopped and asked politely what was going on. He looked at the Belgian plates and our passports, Charlie's British and mine still Dutch, registered the fact that we were from *le Times de Londres*, removed his helmet, scratched his head and without another word manoeuvred his bike so its headlight helpfully shone on the wheel we were about to change. *Allez-y*, he said. We did the swap, the cop smiled and saluted - and roared off into the distance!

When we got to the Paris office opposite the Opéra, we unloaded the jerrycans onto the pavement - we had no option - gathering a small crowd of onlookers as we hastily dragged them into the building. The weeks I spent in France were one of the most absorbing times of my entire life. Garry Lloyd and I chased off to Le Havre because we had heard that the liner *France*, a national symbol, was due to dock, after having been taken over at sea in a mutiny by a strike committee. As the great ship hove into view, we could see an enormous tarpaulin banner along her side with the words, *grève illimitée* - unlimited strike. A small horde of press waited on the quay but were barred from boarding by crew members. As luck would have it, the chairman of the strike committee, a third-class steward, was a war veteran who had fought alongside British commandos in Normandy and was an enthusiastic Anglophile. He allowed *The Times* up the gangway but nobody else. Unfortunately we did not have a photographer with us but it was a nice little scoop all the same. Our French colleagues were rather put out. I also drove, with Charlie again, to Lille, the industrial and mining city in the north-west, where we were received by the mayor at

9 a.m. with a tray of Pernod, which politeness forced us to drink. The sacrifices one had to make for one's employer...

Back in Paris, I was briefly and none too gently detained by the fearsome CRS riot police when I demanded the release of our photographer, a New Zealander arrested during a demonstration where tear gas was generously distributed. I was wearing a leather hat at the time with a folded copy of a tabloid newspaper stuffed in the crown as a precaution against the billyclubs wielded with abandon by the cops. Amazingly the words *Times de Londres* seemed to cut enough ice for a black-clad officer to order us to go away. Shortly afterwards I attended an impassioned dialogue between students and workers at the Odéon - a scene I could not imagine occurring in Britain, where standards of articulacy came nowhere near those of French workers. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a Franco-German student leader of the protest movement, did give a lecture at the London School of Economics in this period, but failed to set the Thames on fire: the quasi-revolution did not cross the Channel although there were some spasmodic, small-scale outbreaks of unrest in Britain. One day we chased round the outskirts of Paris on the *Péripherique* to see if rumours of a massive tank deployment were true - we found none.

Back in London I helped with the coverage of Britain's first heart transplant, before going back to France for my third and longest stint when it became clear that the tumult across the Channel still had "legs." This time I drove south trying to catch up with a remorseless torrent of spreading unrest, to such places as Montelimar (where the nougat comes from) and Lyons, where an ugly riot took place and the police

killed a demonstrator - a remarkably rare fatality amid weeks of national disorder and tension. Finally I reached Marseilles, France's second city, in time to witness an unforgettable rolling strike. The city's "main drag" is a long street, *la Canébière*, which runs all the way down to the harbour. A crowd of workers gathered outside a building and sang the *Marseillaise* - how perfectly appropriate for once - until the employees inside came out to join in. And so the ever-growing crowd passed down the street, repeating the procedure outside every office block and shop until a massive army of cheerful demonstrators gathered at the old port. Some 150 factories, offices and stores were affected. I noticed groups of police watching from side streets without trying to intervene - nearly all of them without their service pistols or even batons. A quarter of a million people got involved in what bore a close resemblance to a carnival. The atmosphere was notably less threatening than previous events in Paris.

An impromptu rally then took place in which speaker after speaker spoke in impassioned Provençal. I could not understand the dialect of most of them, but it was another display of remarkable articulacy. Three bombs went off outside trade union and Communist party offices: there was little damage and no injury in this isolated counter-protest by right-wing elements. My prolonged exposure to a seething France protesting against low wages, high prices and poor pensions ended there. As the airports were closed, I had no option but to drive my rented car over the border into Italy. In a long late-night drive along the corniche road I made for Genoa where I spent a night in a luxury hotel before handing in my hire-car and boarding a flight back to London.

After going to Holland again for another look at the furore inside the Catholic church, Chris, the girls and I took a couple of weeks' holiday at a house rented by my parents in the beautiful village of Bergen-Binnen near my home town of Alkmaar. This pleasant and unique family interlude was not spoiled by indifferent weather, including the most violent thunderstorm I can remember: I stood at the window looking at the rain and the lightning when a flash came so close that I could taste sulphur on my tongue. We had arrived in our brand-new, burgundy coloured Mini, one of the most popular cars ever produced in Britain, by a lumbering airborne car ferry that flew, not to say staggered, from Southend to Rotterdam. Returning by the same means, we got to our house in Ham and as I went to the front door I could hear the phone ringing. It was the foreign newsdesk, who told me that the Soviet Union had just invaded Czechoslovakia. The "Prague spring" of Alexander Dubcek had turned sour and Moscow decided to put a stop to the rapidly spreading liberalisation by putting tanks on the streets of Prague. I was asked to fly at once to Vienna with a view to entering Czechoslovakia to cover the suppression. When I drove up to the border in a hired car the next morning with British colleagues, we were stopped by a Hungarian army officer who stood in front of a Soviet-made tank and politely made it clear he would not let us in. Fortunately other *Times* colleagues had gone to Bavaria and were able to cross the frontier there, so we were covered quite effectively.

Returning empty-handed to Vienna, I called the office, to be told to go to Rumania instead, as that country was thought to be next on the Soviet list for invasion, having shown liberal tendencies even under its despotic leader, Nicolae Ceausescu. A couple

of surreal weeks followed. The Rumanian embassy in Vienna fell over itself to hand out normally reluctantly issued visas to foreign correspondents, obviously in the slender hope that their presence might inhibit the Soviet tanks. Rumanian officials did their best to be nice to us but were constitutionally incapable of talking freely about any event that related to the present crisis. Amid rumours of secret mobilisation of reserves and young men disappearing for an hour or two each day for training, the Rumanian regime calmly stuck to its stated policy that all disputes among socialist countries should be resolved peacefully. There was even openly expressed sympathy for the Czechoslovaks; their tourists, caught in Rumania by events at home, were offered accommodation by ordinary Rumanians.

An American warning to Moscow to leave Rumania alone, regarded there with alarm as counter-productive, was kept out of local media. I was one of 102 correspondents staying in the Athenée Palace hotel, the biggest in Bucharest. Hundreds more were in other hotels. I remember two crises: after two days the Scotch ran out, and orders for whisky were met by unspeakable fluid poured from what looked like genuine Johnny Walker bottles (rumoured to be Chinese "Scotch"). The other crisis was slightly more serious. The hotel had a single teleprinter operator who coped womanfully with half a dozen languages - until a Japanese reporter handed her a text transliterating Japanese words into roman script in page after page of three-letter syllables. She took one look at the copy and went home on strike. I provided copy by phone for the American Westinghouse radio news service, which was a handy bonus. In the end, of course, there was no invasion. My colleagues who had got to Prague were kept busy there for a good six months, a fate I was grateful to escape.

On my return the News Team was gearing up to cover the biggest protest against the Vietnam war ever mounted in London. Apocalyptic forecasts proved to have been seriously exaggerated (as they had been the year before about major disorder at the Notting Hill carnival, which passed off comfortably). The story, such as it was, made the splash on my birthday and I wrote it. The next day I flew to Bonn to stand in briefly for Michael Hornsby, the correspondent who was ensconced in Prague. On day one I had a magnificent story about communist spies who stole a Sidewinder missile from a Nato airbase and sent it by commercial air freight from Frankfurt airport to Moscow. They drove to the airport with the missile protruding through the smashed back window of a Mercedes, its tip covered by a carpet. Small wonder that Bonn was in the grip of one of its frequent bouts of spy mania, rooted in the massive espionage programme, run by the East German Stasi's foreign section headed by Markus Wolff. The day after the missile story I reported on roundups in West Germany and Austria of suspected spies from various east European Warsaw Pact countries. An important Czech spy was arrested on one day; the following day a Bonn defence ministry official, a rear-admiral, committed suicide.

Another of my hardy perennials came up in December 1968 when 400 international Catholic theologians campaigned for a new charter of their rights, complaining of Vatican suppression, persecution and censorship, the Dutch once more to the fore.

The following year of 1969 was no less frenetic than 1968 had been as I spent more and more time working for foreign news and less and less for the News Team. I was



back in Northern Ireland in January after violence broke out at several civil rights demonstrations in Derry and elsewhere. The following month I was in the Republic reporting on a national strike from Dublin. In March I was in Germany again covering east-west tension as the east Germans and Russians obstructed the road route to Berlin for several hours a day on the unconvincing grounds that current Warsaw Pact manoeuvres made the measure unavoidable on "safety" grounds. I spent a few bitterly cold days at the border town of Helmstedt where there was a British military police post used by British and American military observers. Looking back, I believe I came within a whisker of pneumonia: I had to take to my hotel bed for a day with my clothes on to warm up! Every few hours meanwhile groups of American or British army vehicles carefully exercised their treaty rights to cross the former Soviet zone to and from West Berlin.

A couple of weeks later I was in Pakistan, to cover events that eventually led to the break-up of the country when East Pakistan would become independent Bangladesh. Rioting and strikes broke out, especially in the east but also in the west, where the country's biggest city, Karachi, suffered massive damage. President Ayub Khan abdicated in favour of General Yahya Khan, the army C-in-C, who immediately imposed martial law in both East and West and direct military rule, suspending the constitution and legislatures. I flew from Karachi to Dacca, the eastern capital, where martial law soon began to have the desired effect. When the crisis blew over for the time being, I returned to London to be met at Heathrow by a shocked Chris: I had lost at least a stone thanks to a bad bout of food poisoning, I was exhausted and green around the gills. Even so the return flight via Karachi, Damascus and Paris provided some entertainment. PIA, the Pakistani airline, regarded *The Times*

correspondent as important enough to upgrade and look after at every stage of the journey. But at each intermediate stop their officials could not get their act together in time to mollycoddle me before we took off for the next stage. Instead I got an apology after each take-off.

After a break I went back to Bonn for another relief stint, this time for a good three months from spring into summer 1969. I arrived in time to cover an economic crisis caused by the irrepressible strength of the Deutsche Mark and a row about whether or not to revalue the currency between the Grand Coalition partners - the dominant Christian Democrats (CDU) against, the Social Democrats (SPD) in favour. The approaching election enlivened the political atmosphere in Bonn even more. My shaky German, resting on foundations of bluff and dimly remembered Dutch, became distorted as I rapidly acquired a vocabulary that merrily embraced such terms as revaluation, market forces, competition, balance of payments and the like, without being able to cope with buying a pair of socks.

Other major stories included more espionage scandals and a particularly severe bout of pollution in the Rhine, which also took me to Amsterdam to cover the Dutch reaction to alleged West German sloppiness (the Dutch were not exactly innocent bystanders in pollution matters). I was able to visit my parents, now ensconced in a high-rise block in Osdorp, a suburb between Amsterdam and Schiphol airport. They had a fabulous view of a rather bleak, open, windblown neighbourhood, clean of course but soulless. The last notable story I wrote from Bonn this time concerned the auxiliary bishop of Munich, who was accused of complicity as a Wehrmacht

intelligence captain in the reprisal shooting of 17 civilians in Italy in 1944. The allegation was boiled down to one of accessory to manslaughter, conveniently subject to a statute of limitations which meant he could not be charged after 25 years.

In London I had long since made clear my ambition to get a foreign posting. I had concluded that dashing about all over the place was exciting, but I was, Germany apart, learning little or nothing about the places I was visiting. It was the only occasion in my journalistic career that I was working for a management that was prepared to spend money on editorial expansion, and I wanted a share of it. So I was told to go away and learn Spanish, because there were plans to staff Madrid and Buenos Aires. I got to about lesson six when my professional and personal life was spectacularly transformed.

Dan went on to open *The Times'* office in Cape Town, South Africa in 1969 – several years later being politely asked to leave the country due to his anti-apartheid views. He moved on to Bonn, West Germany, to work as the bureau chief before returning to London in the summer of 1977, where the family settled on Eel Pie Island in Twickenham – here Chris dug in her heels and refused to ever move house again. They never did.

As the result of a third cancelled seal cull in the Orkney Islands, this time due to protests, Dan spent his unexpected free time finding out more about the scuttling of the German fleet in Scapa Flow in 1919, which led to his first book "The Grand Scuttle" – written during *The Times'* 50-week shutdown in 1978.

A year later, Dan joined *The Guardian*, where he became Chief Foreign Leaderwriter before leaving after 6 happy years to become a full-time author. He remained on their staff, with frequent telephone calls from the 'Grim Reaper' (the obituaries desk) requesting his services.