

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

OVERVIEW

Prison gives you time to think - especially solitary confinement. In 1972, I began my fifth year in China's top security gaol, a communist in a communist prison.

I did not blame the Cultural Revolution for my fate, although I realized that its turbulence had caused me to be branded as a foreign spy, and swept me into this seven by fifteen foot cell. I did not blame the guards, who peered at me day and night through the Judas-hole in the double door of massive timber and iron bars. It was not until the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 that I took issue with the Party. Previously, when in my cell day after day with nothing to read but the Works of Mao Ze-dong, I passed my time pondering about the forces that had moulded me, from the cradle to the cell, and how to examine my life in the light of Mao Ze-dong Thought.

I was born in 1910, in London. My father was a Jewish cockney Royalist, raised in the East End of London, by immigrant parents who fled Czarist Russia to avoid anti-Semitism and conscription into a pork-eating army. My father, a kindly, religious man who revelled in his ability to speak English without a foreign accent, worked his way up in the fur trade to build a flourishing business. He went bankrupt in the depression of 1921. From then on, my mother took over, financially and otherwise. An ambitious, charismatic romantic, she ran a fashionable fur and dress shop on Oxford Street. She could talk customers into buying whatever she wanted to sell, but couldn't be bothered with the dull details of keeping her books in order.

At the age of 15, I was pulled out of Cheltenham College because my parents couldn't pay the fees. That ended my mother's dream that I go on to Oxford. She was more upset than I was. The anti-Semitic atmosphere coupled with the fact that I excelled in study rather than sport heightened my distaste for the British public school.

During the General Strike of 1926, while working for my uncle, Phil, a London hosiery tycoon, I regarded the strike breakers as heroes, and longed to join them. Mother said no and dad pulled me away from ladies stockings after my uncle insisted I work on Saturdays. My mother took advantage of this to have me resume my education. First came a year at London Polytechnic. Next I was shipped off to learn French in Paris, where of course, I fell in love. A subsequent stay in Germany to learn the language was cut short when my immigration visa to the United States came through.

At the time I was eager to become a millionaire, restore the bankrupt family fortunes, and donate money

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

to Zionism. My timing was bad. I arrived six months before the stock market crash of October, 1929.

I started at the bottom, in the basement of a raw fur business, handling skunk skins for \$15 a week. My distaste for the "skin game" speeded up a growing awareness of the injustice of the entire economic system. The depression, with its flop houses, panhandlers and breadlines, drove me to read about the "Worker's Paradise" of the Soviet Union. My interest in Communism took a great leap forward after I left the fur business and began to work my way through Columbia University, where I became an activist in the student movement. Reading theoretical politics and joining student strikes advanced my education, but nothing pushed me forward from theory to practice as much as joining an expedition to the striking coal fields of Harlan, Kentucky. There, branded foreign trouble-makers and threatened by gun-toting deputies, we were hustled into a kangaroo court and subjected to a jingoistic, racist interrogation.

I graduated from Columbia College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1935. I had little idea what I wanted to do in life, but becoming a millionaire was now the furthest thing from my mind. Returning to England, I first joined the Communist Party, then searched for a job which I could reconcile with my new world outlook. I worked at a couple of poor paying but politically satisfying jobs, on the secretarial staff of a left Labour M.P., and on the editorial board of a left wing student publication. News of the fascist uprising in Spain, and the resistance against it, electrified me, as it did millions in the western world.

Without letting my parents know, I volunteered for the International Brigade, and reached Spain on January 2, 1937. After six weeks of training in a peaceful village, our British Battalion was sent to the front just in time to take part in the Battle of Jarama. On my first day in action, I received two bullet wounds in the thigh, crawled back to our lines, and ended up in a hospital in Madrid. During my convalescence there, I was recruited by the K.G.B. as an anti-Trotskyist spy.

Before embarking on my espionage career I had to complete my convalescence in Madrid. During this time I broadcast news to the United Kingdom, and met many Western war correspondents. These included Stephen Spender, Martha Gelhorn, and Ernest Hemmingway. Also, more intimately, a Canadian communist woman journalist with whom I inevitably had a Hemmingwayesque wartime romance. From this I tore myself away, hitch-hiked back to the front, survived an enemy attack, was transferred first to an International Brigade officers' training course and from there to Barcelona, arriving in time for the street fighting of May, 1937 between

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

opposing left factions. After reporting to the K.G.B., it was suggested that I masquerade as a journalist. My real work was to spy on people whom the Stalinists called Trotskyists - including George Orwell.

My K.G.B. superiors were so satisfied with my work that after a year they sent me to Shanghai to continue it. There I obtained a job as a teacher of Western literature at St. John's, a prestigious mission university. This served as an excellent cover. Meanwhile I mingled once more with Western war correspondents, one of whom was my assigned target, Frank Glass. Glass, a real Trotskyist who had recently visited Trotsky in Mexico, proved to be a persuasive political propagandist and an attractive personality. He gradually shook my Stalinist faith. Shanghai, too, had its effect on me. While horrified by its contrasting wealth, poverty and corruption, I was bewitched by the beauty of Chinese women - especially by the slim, slit-skirted dollar a dance hostesses in the cabarets. Seemingly suspecting that I was becoming a traitor or a playboy my K.G.B bosses broke contact with me, leaving me an ill-paid school teacher in the Paradise of Adventurers.

My spying career cut short, I decided to see the interior of China and headed for Chengdu, where I had lined up a new teaching job. Half way along my rough, hazardous journey, I heard the news that Trotsky had been assassinated. Now it was clear. Their mission accomplished, the K.G.B. had thrown me overboard, not as untrustworthy, but because I was no longer useful.

In Chengdu, between Japanese bombing raids, I not only taught students who had trekked to the "Great Rear" from universities all over China. I also met secretly with a small group of Christian socialist missionaries studying the history of the Chinese Revolution - a dangerous enterprise under Chiang Kai-Shek's repressive regime. Between such prosaic activities, I found time to carry on a courtship with my future wife, Isabel Brown, daughter of Canadian missionaries.

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June, 1941 overcame, my Trotskyite-induced doubts of Stalin. I decided to return to England and re-enlist in the fight against fascism. Leaving Chengdu, I sailed from Shanghai across the Pacific, tossing my Trotskyite books overboard en route. I made my way from San Francisco to New York, writing magazine articles to make a living. To pay my way back to England, I worked on an oil tanker across the Atlantic. Upon arriving, I rejoined the British Communist Party then volunteered for the Royal Air Force where I became an intelligence officer, monitoring Japanese air force operations. Within a year, after a simple wartime wedding in which the Registry Office house painters acted as witnesses, I was headed back to Asia

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

on a troop ship bound for Bombay.

My official R.A.F. Intelligence work took me to India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, Hong Kong and Singapore. At the same time, I volunteered for overtime work as an Education and Welfare officer, secretly contacting local communists. The democratic movement within the British Armed Forces also aroused me to action, as did the allure of soldiers and sailors of the sister services. After I had been overseas for three years, Winston Churchill decided that Russia, our "noble ally," had suddenly become our ignoble enemy. I was demoted for my subversive activities (political, not romantic), and shipped home to peacetime England and marital bliss.

After studying on veterans' grants at London University, engaging in Communist Party activity and hunting for jobs, Isabel and I availed ourselves of His Majesty's offer of free "repatriation" to the land from which volunteers had come to Britain to join the armed forces. (Isabel had served in the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Corps). For us, this meant an all expenses paid journey on a slow boat back to China.

In the fall of 1947, we ran Chiang Kai-Shek's blockade of the Chinese Communist's "Liberated Area." With credentials from the British Communist Party, we were given permission by the local Communist authorities to settle in a poor North China village in the Taihang Mountains. Our objective was to study the area's history and witness the campaign to distribute the land to the peasants. Our detailed notes of this procedure were worked up into books later published in Britain and U.S.A.

After eight months of primitive but thrilling rural life we moved a couple of hundred miles north. There we were asked to teach English in a village school set up to train staff for the Foreign Office of a future Chinese People's Government. We taught between bombing raids, frequently scattering in the fields, hiding in the mountains with our thirty-odd students, who later became ambassadors, government ministers, and officials.

In the Spring of 1949, we entered Beijing, newly liberated by the Communists. Our village school, brought to the city, grew in numbers. The students and teachers roughed it, sleeping on the floor in the former barracks of the old Japanese embassy, and sitting on camp stools in class. On October 1, Isabel and I were among a handful of non-Chinese on a makeshift platform, witnessing the march past of hundreds of thousands of citizens and soldiers, armed with American guns and tanks captured from Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang Army. We heard Mao Ze-dong proclaim from the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen) the birth of the Chinese People's Republic.

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

He said "The Chinese People have stood up." In my heart, I stood up with them.

For the next four decades - except for my five years in gaol - I taught English and world history, in a school which grew from thirty students into a university with three thousand. I took part in mass movements, or "ideological remoulding" - Mao's method of remaking human nature - hoping to change my own nature in the process. Certainly I did change, from a shaky Stalinist into an unwavering Maoist. I remained so not only in gaol, but for ten years after my release.

I proclaimed the achievements of the Chinese Revolution during periodic trips abroad, doing propaganda in Britain, Canada, and the United States to encourage friendship with China. During these decades, besides writing magazine articles for publication in the west, with Isabel I co-authored three books on Chinese land reform and collectivization.

In the 1950s, I renewed my contact with Soviet citizens - this time not K.G.B. agents, but academics, teaching at my university. We got along well, and at the end of our first family holiday abroad returned to China by way of the Soviet Union to see them. They were warm and generous to a fault, fully living up to my youthful idealised expectations. But their social system did not. The poverty, bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption shocked me. On returning to China I didn't mention this; in fact I hardly acknowledged it to myself. But with the split in the world communist camp in 1960 I unhesitatingly sided with China against the Soviet Union.

Still, my relations with the Chinese were not free from friction. My inherited hatred of snobbery carried over into the academic field. I made a fetish of teaching plain English. Some of my professorial Chinese colleagues, who had done graduate work in élitist foreign universities, looked down on my mere Columbia University B.A. degree. So when I was appointed to senior administrative positions, partly because the school leaders felt they could rely on me as a Communist, I had a hard time. This was due to my inexperience, semi-illiteracy in Chinese, and lack of subtlety in exercising authority. After some years I was removed from direct leadership and promoted to the honourable rank of Advisor to the University. That is, to a position purportedly on a par with the school president. Even there, I was ill-mannered enough not to keep quiet, but conducted myself as a gadfly, or a tribune of the people in a hierarchical society. Perhaps that helped leave me open to being framed up as a foreign spy, which landed me in gaol during the cultural revolution.

Somehow my sanity survived isolation for five years behind bars. I was not tortured, thanks to Premier

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

Zhou En-lai. But I was kept in a cell devoid of furniture, except for a six inch high plank bed, a tiny wash basin and a seatless toilet. Day and night, by the dim prison light, I was subject to observation through the Judas hole in the double door. My reading was limited to the works of Mao Ze-dong and the Communist Party press. Interrogations, based upon the presumption of guilt, were conducted by apparently sincere officials charged with getting me to confess my "crimes." Whenever I professed innocence, I was told, "Of course you're guilty. Otherwise how could you be here."

It was a combination of tragedy and comedy, but I dared not laugh until I was back in my cell. When I "confessed" to joining the Red Guards, I was cursed. "You didn't join - you WORMED your way in!" they shouted. Then, when I spoke of "worming my way into a British study group, which my interrogators considered suspect, I was cursed again. The one captor I had nicknamed Sneerer barked, "You didn't worm your way in - you joined!"

Comic interludes apart, it was a dreary drama. Little things became important. I found myself eagerly anticipating normally mundane chores, like washing my clothes, clipping my nails, and taking my monthly shower. Yet the years were enriched by introspection, during which I measured my life with the yardstick of the Thought of Mao Ze-dong.

I was released from prison on January 27, 1973. After a moving reunion with family, friends, students and colleagues, I was back at work within three days. That, in the eyes of Chinese society, was proof of my innocence. Six weeks later, on March 8, Premier Zhou En-lai left his hospital bed to give a reception in the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square. In a passionate speech to 800 people, he explained the political problems which had led to the injustice done to me and a handful of other English-speaking victims of frame-ups and harassment during the cultural revolution. He apologized to each of us by name on behalf of the Party and Government. Frail as he was, he did the rounds of the 80 tables of guests, then made a point of shaking hands and chatting with us victims. Then he went back to the hospital, and I held up my head.

Next year I went to England, Canada, and the United States, doing propaganda, defending the positive aspects of the cultural revolution! Throughout the seventies the University assigned me increasingly responsible duties. I felt more at home than ever in my adopted country. But towards the end of the decade, with a consciousness sharpened by Chinese and Western friends, including our three sons, I gradually grew critical and

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

disillusioned. I saw that with the expansion of the economy went an expansion of corruption - and a contraction of democracy. With the policy of opening up went a weakening of socialist moral standards. With a certain raising of living standards, went a growing gap between rich and poor. Money ruled the roost. When, in 1987, Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yao-bang opposed all this, he was fired - in flagrant breach of the Party constitution. And when students and others demonstrated in peaceful protest, they were brutally suppressed. Some were savagely sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. My five years in prison did not undermine my admiration for the past-achievements of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Government. Yet now, for the first time in 40 years, while my love for the Chinese people remains as strong as ever, I feel at odds with the powers that be.

The climax of this discord came with the democratic movement of the Spring of 1989. I went along with the demand for democracy, as well as the denunciation of corruption, nepotism, and bureaucracy. And when the movement was suppressed in blood, when the massacre was denied and followed by a witch hunt in which the victims were blamed - that was the end of my decades of adulation. I had thought that People's China was humanity's guide to a better world. I still acknowledge her past achievements. But her record has been tragically tarnished. Now the task is to cleanse it. I hope I shall live long enough to see that done, and play a small part in doing it.