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## **CHAPTER 11**

### **Pilgrimages - West and East (1957-58)**

#### **Pilgrimage to the West**

After ten years in China, we finally went abroad. I had not even considered returning to England for my father's funeral as any filial Chinese or Jew would have done. Dad died in 1952, the year of the San Fan and the Peace Conference. To have left at that time would have struck me as dereliction of duty. Now, in 1957 our sons were four, six and eight years old. We had registered their births at the consulate, so they were British subjects; but their knowledge of English was limited to such words as crocodile and hippopotamus for which we did not know the Chinese when we told them their bedtime stories. Isabel was partly to blame for their linguistic ignorance. As an infant she had lisped in Chinese learnt from her nurse in Chengdu. But that language was not included in the curriculum of the Canadian primary school run by the missionaries. This was so that their children would be able to cope with secondary and university education in Canada. So when she returned from Canada to China with her M.A. at the age of 22 she had to learn the language again. She vowed that our children should not grow up as she had, ignorant of Chinese. The result was that they did not learn English. Now was the time for them to start - and to meet their western relatives and see their parents' homelands. Isabel and I too were ready for a sentimental journey.

The sentiment was mixed with storm and stress. For the first time in our lives we had the children to ourselves for longer than a day at a stretch; they had previously been at nursery or primary school or looked after by a wonderful Manchu nurse. So the three day train journey to Hong Kong and the 33 hour flight across the Pacific with three lively little boys whom we had encouraged to be daring rather than docile was not a joyride for us. We reached Vancouver about three in the morning to be hassled by immigration officers. Our arrival in Canada was only three years after the end of the Korean War in which Canadian troops had fought against the

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Chinese People's Volunteers and anti-Chinese feeling still ran high in some Canadian circles. Isabel could hardly be stopped from returning to her own country but the four male members of the family were British. After examining my passport the official asked aggressively: "Beiping? That's Red China, isn't it? What've you been doing there?" "Teaching," I replied. This clearly struck him as highly suspicious if not actual treachery to the English-speaking world. "Why have you come to Canada?" "To visit my in-laws, the children's grandparents." After further interrogation he abruptly commanded: "You wait here." We heard him making a phone call. He came back sweet as maple syrup, wished us a pleasant visit and told us that the children were entitled to receive free milk since they had a Canadian mother. Somebody higher up apparently had told him that the Korean War was over and that there were 600 million customers across the Pacific. None the less, after reaching Isabel' parents' home in St. Mary's with its "4,201 contented people", we were visited by immigration officials who came to ensure that we were really there.

Actually I was leading a prim and proper family life. This included going to church on Sunday for the sake of my in-laws' reputation. Two years before, when they returned from China and spoke well of it, old acquaintances cut them in the street. They took no notice of such slights and spoke sweet greetings. As in Markham's poem:

He drew a circle that shut me out  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!

They succeeded in enclosing Isabel and me in the bigger circle, too. The farm folk relatives of course took us as their own, regardless of Red China, and aged Aunt Maud for all my atheism described me as "a Christian gentlemen"! Our sons, however, ran into social snags. Once visiting Isabel's farming relatives at the hamlet of Brown's Corners (Isabel was a Brown) the boys were offered some luscious home-made chocolate cake. In accordance with Chinese etiquette they said no thank you. The cake was not offered again, the hostess apparently thinking the boys preferred Chinese food. Back home they complained bitterly. They had expected to be pressed three times before accepting. This was their first lesson in cross-cultural studies.

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My problems were different. From the start I saw this trip abroad as a chance to do propaganda for China, writing letters to the press and making speeches. Isabel's parents had done the same on their return from China and now they backed me up. Mother secured an invitation for me to speak at the St. Mary's Women's Institute, Isabel for some reason not being available. And at church one Sunday Dad introduced me to the judge who was chairman of the local Rotarians, suggesting me as a suitable luncheon speaker. The judge was polite but no invitation came. The St. Mary's women were evidently more broad-minded than their menfolk. However, Christian Socialist former missionary friends from Chengdu arranged a speaking tour for me in Toronto and Montreal.

I set off happily both for political reasons and for a brief release from small town family life; helping tend three lively boys was not my idea of a holiday. The tour was not all plain sailing. 1957 was the year after the Soviet intervention in Hungary, which had thrown left-wing and progressive ranks into disarray, and some of the criticism of the Soviet Union spilled over on to its then ally China. Both in Toronto, where I spoke in some churches and in Montreal where meetings had been arranged in some luxury hotels I faced hostile questions. These came especially from comfortably off audiences sometimes largely or entirely Jewish. They or their parents had emigrated to Canada from Russia around the time of the 1905 revolution, bringing with them radical ideas which were kept alive in Canadian sweatshops. Now, half a century later, many of them had gone up in the world. According to our Christian Socialist friends these once radical landed immigrants by 1957 still had some social and political conscience but sought social acceptance and respectability.

The Hungarian events of 1956 gave them the excuse to disavow their past. I got a taste of this in their aggressive questions following my talks on China - which no doubt I idealised. But on one occasion I was welcomed with warmth. This was in a dingy, ramshackle hall in the slums of the Montreal ghetto. The garment and fur workers, still speaking English with a Yiddish accent, like my grandmother's, took me to their hearts both because of their friendship for China and socialism and their pride in me, "one of themselves", yet a professor.

In Toronto, with Isabel's approval I looked up Jean, whom I had loved in Spain. I had not seen her since I passed through Canada 15 years before on my way back to England from China - to marry Isabel and join the

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R.A.F. It was an awkward encounter. I kissed Jean clumsily, inhibited by years of happy married life. We talked of politics. Jean had drifted away from communism which distanced us further. The old spell was broken. We parted sadly ill-at-ease.

After six months we left Canada to complete our leave in England. Our stay in Canada had indeed been more of a sentimental journey than a social survey, for we had moved mainly among the comfortably off middle class. Though realising I was under the watchful eye of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) whom I had admired when I read penny-dreadfuls in childhood, I left Canada impressed by the beauty of the land and the people, especially their do-it-yourself spirit. One day in St. Mary's I took our electric hot-plate to be repaired. "Need a new coil," said the shop-keeper and handed me one. I was taken aback, expecting to have it installed for me. He read my mind. "Go in the back of the shop," he said. "Plenty of tools there. It'd be a waste of your time and money to leave it here." I did as he suggested and fixed it myself, thinking what a pampered lot we intellectuals were in the land of Confucius, even though we talked and wrote of identifying with the working people.

Perhaps this was in my mind when soon after reaching England Isabel and I journeyed to London's dockland to hunt up a docker, Ted Kirby, to whom Michael Shapiro had given us a note of introduction. Isabel and I both felt the urge to "merge with the workers." Certainly we enjoyed our talk with the family, and the tea and kippers; and we learnt some of the facts of working class life during a conducted tour of the neighbourhood. But we were only skimming the surface and our stay in England as in Canada was mainly in the middle class.

At first our family of five crowded into one room of my brother Maurice's Kensington flat. In a flat upstairs lived "Nassim Major" one of the wealthy Middle East Jews of our boarding school days at Glenmuir nearly 40 years earlier. The doorman in his gold-buttoned military looking uniform had confided in Maurice. "Very clever man that Mr. Nassim. Makes a thousand pounds over the telephone before getting up at ten o'clock in the morning." I thought, there but for the grace of Marx go I. Maurice himself, as his address indicated, was not doing too badly in the film business. But though we had taken different paths he had a sneaking admiration for my left-wing ideas and way of life and even before we camped in his flat he had subscribed to the Daily

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Worker. He was kind-hearted and generous and took Isabel and me out to exotic Malayan and Indian restaurants and entertained us and my orthodox aunts to heavy meals at kosher ones.

Finally we found a flat with the help of old China friends, the Bryans, whom we had not seen since the strangely assorted wedding party of the Hawkes in Beijing. As the Bryans' neighbours we soon learnt the ways of middle class life in Finchley and more important talked constantly with them and mutual friends about China. The boys, now five, seven and nine went up the road to a school which one of its former pupils who came to China described as the worst in London. We knew nothing of that at the time and even if we had I doubt if it would have changed our minds. We felt that our sons should go the ordinary local school where they would mix with ordinary working class kids (though we lived in a middle class enclave). The boys were happy enough there but did not make fast progress with their English. So we went to see their teachers. They had apparently noticed a certain lack of response on our sons' part but had no idea that English was not their native language; in fact the boys had been exposed to it for only six months in Canada, in which land of immigrant "New Canadians" they had been given special coaching by devoted religious teachers. We had made this clear to the London headmistress, a forceful athletic-looking character, but she had forgotten to pass on the information to the boy's class teachers. The oversight was finally made good and our sons went on to the foundations of their present bilingualism.

As in Canada, we visited relatives and old friends and gave talks on China, then in the throes of the anti-rightist campaign. This had followed the launching of the movement to "let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend", proclaimed as Party policy for the flourishing of arts and sciences under Communist leadership. Now, it is clear that the actual number of rightists was extremely small and that the vast majority of those branded, in order to fulfil a ridiculous "quota" was monstrously inflated. This caused tragic suffering and did China immense harm. I did not know that at the time and probably would not have believed it if I had been told. So I cheerfully travelled around England doing propaganda for both the anti-rightist and the hundred flowers campaigns. At Cambridge University I spoke at a meeting sponsored by the Communist-led Britain-China Friendship Association. After my usual enthusiastic description of the current situation, there were

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questions, some of them politely expressing doubts about my glowing presentation; some were sharply critical, even hostile. I countered them confidently, always relishing a scrap, and poured scorn on the idea that Mao Zedong had simply "inveigled Chinese intellectuals to stick their necks out so that he could chop their heads off." Now I realise that the sceptical questioners were closer to the truth than I. Then I had the faith that moves mountains.

Not all our travels in England were for the sake of making speeches. We went to Nottingham to see my sister Vera, who lived there for 40 years before returning to her husband's family home in Yorkshire. Vera and Alick were as cordial and hospitable as Maurice though her ideas were as different from Maurice's as from mine. We would have tea on the lawn of the their lovely suburban house, watching the birds and admiring the roses in the sunken flower garden. We reminisced about our childhood and talked about relatives, and occasionally touched on D.H. Lawrence who had courted in nearby Clifton Grove. And I marvelled again at how we three, Vera, Maurice and I, after growing up in the same home had taken such different paths in life.

Our stay in England brought back memories of a happy childhood. And I saw something of its lovely landscape as I travelled round giving talks on China from Sussex, where I was invited to speak at an R.A.F. station, to Gloucestershire where I had gone to school (at Cheltenham). In Gloucester, while admiring the Gothic architecture of the cathedral, I was surprisingly whisked back from the middle ages to the Korean War. Fixed to one of the towering grey stone columns was a wooden figure of Christ on the cross, which the colonel of the Gloucester regiment had carved in captivity. Thinking of our Chinese student interpreters in the P.O.W. camps my train of thought took me in a flash to China, to which we would soon be on our way. And I began to think that much as I loved England, China now meant home.

### **Pilgrimage to the East**

We returned to China by way of the Soviet Union. It was twenty years since 1938 when my hopes of going to China via Moscow were dashed by the trials and the imminence of world war. Since the brief period of doubt during my three years in Shanghai and Chengdu, my faith in the Soviet Union had been restored, by the heroic defence of Stalingrad and by ten years immersion in China's "great and unbreakable friendship" with the Soviet Union. So I looked forward to the fulfilment of my old dream as well as to seeing Vera, our former Soviet adviser and to meeting her colleague Masha.

Two Soviet experts had come to our school in the early '50s. But as one taught Russian, the other Spanish, we had not had much to do with them. In 1955 several more arrived, headed by Vera from Leningrad, where she held a senior post at the university there. She had fluent English though she had never met native speakers, and she confessed to feeling nervous of us at first, fearing her English was not up to par. She need not have worried. It was excellent. Vera came from a large family, whom she missed. So she loved to come to our flat to play with the children, whom she stuffed with Soviet chocolates; and to talk with Isabel and me. With us she could relax and escape the formal and deferential treatment which the Chinese comrades felt befitted a senior Soviet adviser. We became friendly - friendly enough to have amicable disagreements. Vera was daring enough to say to us she disagreed with China's political movements which interfered with the teaching calendar. To her the curriculum was sacred. We disagreed on that and also when she said: "Your Chinese students are wonderfully enthusiastic, just as ours were right after the revolution. It's the romantic phase. It'll wear off." We disputed this, saying that our students' revolutionary enthusiasm would be maintained by ideological remoulding and those movements which she objected to. Vera, who had joined the Soviet Communist Youth League in 1924, the year of Lenin's death, was more realistic than we.

In 1956, at the end of her first year in China she went home for her summer holidays and we and two Western colleagues (Bertha, American and Margaret, British) clubbed together to buy books in English for her to present to the English Department of her university. We received a thank-you letter from Masha, which started a

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flow of correspondence. It lasted until the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, when we stopped it for fear of causing Masha embarrassment.

Now we were to see Vera again and to meet Masha for the first time. More important we were to see Soviet society which I had admired for so many years. My attitude towards the Soviet Union, since the early '30s, had had two ups and one down. First I felt, like Sidney and Beatrice Webb, whose massive volumes I waded through, that Soviet socialism was indeed building a new civilization. I liked to quote Lincoln Steffens' famous statement on his return from the Soviet Union in 1919: "I have seen the future and it works." And I refuted what I took to be slanders of the new civilization. I had never considered the possibility of evil in the Soviet Union until being influenced by the Trotskyist Frank Glass in Shanghai in the late '30s. After that I found my way back step by step into the Stalinist fold and thanked China for teaching me to love Stalin better. When we studied his essay "On Marxism and Linguistics" I went along with it uncritically, thinking I should grasp it, not question it - though I was taken aback by the rudeness with which Stalin attacked Soviet scholars whom he disagreed with, having been taught by the Chinese that rudeness and sarcasm should never be directed at comrades. Apart from such minor reservations my faith was again almost unbounded. Almost but not quite. Our three weeks stopover in the Soviet Union on our way back to China from England in 1958 raised some disconcerting questions in my mind.

We sailed on a Soviet ship from London to Leningrad. It was a delightful trip with landings at Copenhagen, Stockholm and Helsinki. We travelled tourist in comfortable quarters and the food was excellent, the same in all classes. The tables, for twenty or so, were adorned with big dishes of caviar, piled high. One massive American, helping himself to his third or fourth dollop said: "I just can't afford not to eat more of this".

At Leningrad we were met by Vera and Masha. They took us to a little hotel near Masha's one room flat which she had shared with her sister for over 20 years. Getting out of the car I started to enter the hotel to register, after piling our many cases on the pavement outside. The Soviet ladies almost shrieked in alarm. "Don't leave your bags unattended. They may get lost" - a euphemism for stolen. I was amazed. Could such a thing happen 40 years after the revolution? In Beijing, I thought, that would be impossible. Later, when we were eating in



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hotel dining rooms women would come up and try to buy the clothes off Isabel's back; and once a woman invited herself to our table and tried to get her meal put on our bill. Travelling by train along the Black Sea coast a friend of Masha's saw us off with typical Russian friendliness for a few stations down the line. She did not buy a ticket but tipped the conductor. Such a thing was unthinkable (by me) in China. These little negative incidents were a shock to my naive political system. But I felt it would be wrong, after reaching China, to mention them to our friends there.

Masha was a middle-aged romantic in love with the English language and English literature. (Her letters had been peppered with questions on modern usage, one query I recall coming from Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. In what situation, she enquired, would one use the hero's phrase "you give me a royal pain in the arse"?) Some of her love of English doubtless spilled over onto Isabel and me, the first native speakers she had met. In the light of my youthful reading of the Russian classics I regarded Masha as a "typical Russian": hotheaded, warmhearted, excitable, subjective, energetic and generous to a fault. Trying to facilitate our travel in her country she would bridle at the bureaucracy of Intourist and at times make things harder rather than easier for us. Nevertheless she accompanied us as a tireless and intelligent guide and interpreter from Leningrad to Moscow to the Black Sea to the Caucasus. She was an activist of the Peace Committee of Leningrad (it was this which enabled her to associate with us so freely) and told us terrible tales of the World War II siege of the city, in whose defence she had played her part as a young woman. We were convinced of the truth of what she told us by the number of cripples on the streets and the enormous majority of women over men. And by our visit to Vera's home, a big timber structure near the Gulf of Finland. The family was large but there was not one adult male. Vera had once referred briefly to her husband, saying "something happened to him". What? I never dared ask. Whatever it was Vera herself must have been in good standing or she would never have been allowed to go and work in China.

When we travelled on the crowded busses in Leningrad or elsewhere, we - Isabel, her Quaker sister Julia, who came as far as Moscow for the ride, and I - chatted with fellow passengers with Masha as interpreter. She introduced us all as "British communists"; and everywhere the response was a wish for peace and friendship.

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Our most memorable bus ride was in the Caucasus to a one-time czarist shooting lodge. The bus started late because the driver went off for a shave in honour of the "British Communist Delegation". The bus being full, wooden chairs were brought on board to provide seats for us. Then we started the nerve-racking climb from the Black Sea up the mountains, round steep hairpin bends bordering precipices. The Georgian driver appointed himself tour-guide and turned round to face us leaving one hand on the wheel, pointing out the historic sights. We urged the driver not to turn round but to keep his eye on the road. "I could drive along this road with my eyes closed," he replied with Georgian bravado. Maybe he was right.

In 1958 the Georgians were still staunch Stalinists. At the time I was insensitive to this and when we visited the museum at Gori, Stalin's birthplace I wrote the wrong thing in the visitors' book. In China we had studied two statements of the Chinese Communist Party: "On Some Historical Experiences of the Proletarian Dictatorship" and "More on Some Historical Experiences etc", which we privately referred to as "On and Moron", though in fact we were convinced by them. They did much to restore communists' confidence after the Hungarian events of 1956 which had thrown the British Communist Party among others into disarray. Impressed by the balanced Chinese exposition I wrote, "It is inspiring to see such vivid reminders of the heroic role of Comrade Stalin and his fellow Bolsheviks in the revolution." Masha told me after she had translated my remarks that they were not welcome. In the mind of good Georgians in 1958, it seemed, the Russian revolution had been led and carried through by Stalin alone. Any suggestion of collective leadership and mass support was heresy.

### **Back to China for the Great Leap Forward**

Back in China I kept my qualms to myself, still thinking that the Soviet experts made a contribution to our teaching, though in some other fields they were out of touch with Chinese reality. In 1954, to celebrate the first five years of the Chinese People's Republic, the Soviet Union had put up a large exhibition hall and displayed Soviet products industrial and agricultural. The latter included some huge horses, bred from British shires. They were no doubt as powerful as they were immense but the canny Chinese farmers looked them up and down doubtfully, asking: "What do they eat?" China was then still struggling to feed humans.

She made a spectacular effort in the Great Leap Forward of 1958. That endeavour has since been derided and denounced. But at the time I was inspired by what struck me as an heroic attempt to push back the bounds of the possible, to shatter long observed natural laws, to achieve the seemingly impossible. Even now, decades later I am reluctant to write off the Great Leap as nothing but a blunder. I still think that the mass movement by China's millions of peasants to build irrigation works and to prospect for or report reserves of iron ore long known to them was an epic achievement. But there was one natural law, I felt, that could not be defied: the human being's need for sleep. At the Foreign Languages Institute we found, on our return in 1958, text books were being compiled or rewritten by teams of teachers working night after night into the small hours. This could not go on, I maintained, without sacrificing the quality of the work and the health of the workers. As to puddling low grade "steel" in backyard furnaces, I put in a token night shift on the campus and was carried away by the exhilarating spirit of the students and teachers on the job, to say nothing of the strength of the brawny school cooks. Something else carried away was my pet steel hammer, which our seven year-old son Michael contributed to the pool of "raw material for smelting". We forgave Michael on grounds of age - or youth, but such well-intentioned but impractical acts occurred all over China: finished products of fair quality steel were being melted down to re-emerge from the furnace as low grade iron.

(We learnt more of such things when we re-visited Ten Mile Inn 27 years after the Great Leap to gather material for a book. We had a happy reunion with Lao Jin, then holding a position at sub-province level. He

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said: "Now I can tell you the truth about certain things which I wasn't free to tell you in 1959 and 1960, when I was commune Party Secretary. During the Great Leap an order came down to collect 200 jin of scrap metal from every peasant household. Some sort of investigation had been made which revealed that that was the average amount of metal to be found in every home - in the pots and pans and stoves, scales and steelyards, door lintels and so on. These finished products were all to be collected and melted down as raw material!" Young Jin, a loyal Party member, was a tireless propagandist for the order and travelled all over the commune to see that it was carried out. Then he went home - and discovered that his obedient subordinates had cleaned out his own home. There was not a utensil left in which to cook his supper. He laughed as he told us the story in 1985, not saying when doubts arose in his mind about the backyard steel making of the Great Leap Forward, for which Mao Zedong eventually criticised himself.)

I myself had few reservations at that time. In fact the year 1958, when we returned from England, until 1959 when the "three years of hardship" began stands out in my memory as an idyllic interlude - especially the weeks spent planting trees at Anjiazhuang in the Western Hills. Though born and bred in London and having spent most of my life in big cities such as New York and Beijing, I loved the country. But I often felt that this love was hollow because I had never worked on the land. Now for three short weeks I rose at dawn, with my fellow teachers and our students. We climbed the hills shouldering pick and shovel, dug "fish-scale" pits, planted fruit and nut trees and returned worn out to sleep on a kang in a peasant family's home. For me it was a sort of redemption, with joy prevailing over guilt. One day, returning to the village with a student I saw two greybeards shouldering large loads of twigs but swinging along chattering and joking. The four of us sat down for a rest and a chat. Then when the time came to go on, inspired by the spirit of "serve the people", my student and I said: "You must be tired. Let us carry your loads back to the village for you." The greybeards - they were both in their seventies - protested but in the end gave in. I was 48 at the time, quarter of a century younger than the old men; but when, sitting down, I had buckled on the load I could hardly stagger to my feet. I finally managed and lurched along, comparing myself to the two old men, who, to the manner born, had been sauntering effortlessly down the mountain path.

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Compared with their lifetime of labour my three short weeks of tree-planting were a picnic. Yet I thought that my unaccustomed efforts were quite heroic and that I merited recognition for them and perhaps some relief from the simple, though ample diet of boiled cabbage, pickled turnip, sweet potatoes and grain. When November 7, the anniversary of the Russian Revolution came round I thought there would surely be a meal with meat, at least for Isabel and me; after all we were foreigners! Sure enough at noon I was summoned from the hilltop to the village and strode along my mouth watering. But when I arrived I found out that the feast was to be of politics not protein. Isabel and I had asked for a briefing on the newly set-up Anjiazhuang People's commune and now we were to get it.

Shortly before we left Anjiazhuang there was a celebration, but again it was not a feast; it was a concert. Our students and teachers had spent part of each evening teaching the village women to read and write and the children to sing songs. This touched the hearts of their parents who had been deprived of education before liberation. Now they arranged an evening at which their children could display their new skills by singing and dancing for us. Their unpolished performance moved us and brought tears to their parents' eyes. Out of gratitude they called on us to sing! The Chinese teachers of course did well, so did Isabel and our British colleague Margaret. I tried to weasel out but was not allowed to. So I decided, unwisely, to sing "The Wearing of the Green", which I have long loved for its patriotic, anti-colonial content and poetic words. Unfortunately it is a song for a singer with a far wider range than mine. I love singing but have not inherited the flair of my father and mother. So I croaked my way through the stirring words changing key several times. My miserable performance was politely applauded by the villagers to whom all western music sounded strange. But it has remained a standing joke between Isabel and me. Finally came the day of our departure. The villagers wept as had those other villagers on the day 20 years before in Spain when we left Madrigueras for the battlefield. Now it was not because we were going into battle but because we had brought something new into the villagers' lives. And on this day, at last, we were to have a meat meal of mountain goat. But I had hardly taken the first delicious bite when the loud speakers blared: "Stop eating. Run and get your bedrolls and baggage." I cursed. What bit of bureaucratic bungling was this, to deprive us of our first decent meal in three weeks? The villagers at considerable

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cost had called in all their donkeys from the fields or from transporting coal so that they could carry our baggage the three miles down the valley to the railway station. When the animals were loaded we returned to our bowls of now cold goat meat. It tasted good.

Food or the lack of it was soon to become more important than at any time since liberation not just for me but for the Chinese nation. For 1959, the year after we returned to school from Anjiazhuang was the first of the "three hard years" when many people died of starvation and most people went short. There were many reasons for the poor harvest, natural and man-made: droughts in some parts, floods in others; waste and extravagance through over-optimism brought on by the abundant harvests at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward. And in 1960, when China was down she was hit by the Soviet Union's sudden withdrawal of her experts and renegeing on key industrial contracts. We "foreign comrades" were given special treatment and spared the effects of the shortages from which Chinese people suffered. We were even invited to a banquet, as usual on October 1 National Day, in the Great Hall of the People. It was a shock on entering the banqueting hall which could comfortably seat 5,000 people at 500 round tables. There were only 20 or 30 tables seating between two and three hundred, placed in the centre of the hall like an islet in an ocean. But the feast was as lavish as ever, though we hadn't the stomach for it. On ordinary days Isabel and I had lunch as usual in the teachers' canteen, which served meagre and monotonous food, mostly watery cabbage (oil was scarce) and coarse grain. Once every ten days or so there was a bowl of sweet millet wine to bolster the diet. I drank it without a second thought, though I should have left it for those who needed it. For we could supplement our diet with food bought at the special shop at the Friendship Hotel, to say nothing of the substantial breakfast and supper we ate at home. On Sundays, too, when the children were home from the nursery school where they boarded during the week, we had a good western dinner in the "small dining-room" reserved for the school president and his Soviet wife and other senior personnel. All the same I did at this time go down with hepatitis and spent 6 weeks in an isolation hospital. There I was fed a diet so high in protein and sugar that I secretly flushed food down the toilet for fear of getting fat. Meanwhile the students and teachers were plucking the leaves of elm trees which were cooked in the steamed buns to provide extra vitamins. I mentioned this in a letter abroad, but as I often did in special circumstances submitted it

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voluntarily to the English Department Party Secretary for approval. He censored the reference to our eating leaves, saying it would feed foreign "rumours" about starvation in China. I took it on myself at this time to proclaim that despite the hardships nobody died of starvation. I wish that were true. Once I received a parcel of 2 pounds of rice from a friend abroad whom I had known twenty years earlier in Shanghai. I acknowledged it with a patronising open letter, published in a Canadian newsletter, thanking the lady for her good intentions but saying she was an innocent victim of foreign atrocity stories. I believed what I wrote at the time but I do not believe it now. People did die of starvation and of illness brought on by undemourishment, though enemies of China and of socialism doubtless exaggerated the numbers. But at this time my commitment to China brooked no criticism or acknowledgement of failings - at least to the outside world and only reluctantly to myself. I remember an American friend, a teacher at another university who would complain to us of unjust treatment by bureaucrats or ultra-leftists. At first I tended to disbelieve her; then I urged her to be understanding, while I reported the injustice to our Party Secretary in the hope of helping her get redress. But I did this without letting her know. The "liberation of one's thinking" is a long, hard struggle. During the three years of hardship I felt bound more than ever to be loyal and unquestioning.

It was during those hard years that Isabel and I returned to Ten Mile Inn to gather material for another book - about Ten Mile Inn in the People's Commune. In 1959 I went there for a week. For some reason Isabel did not accompany me but a young colleague did, to act as interpreter and companion. We were met at the railway station in the city of Handan from which in 1947 we had walked for a whole day beside our baggage-laden mule-cart to the village. In 1959 I travelled by jeep along a new dirt road. After a couple of hours I saw a crowd ahead, holding red banners. "What's that?" I asked the county Party Secretary who had come to pick us up, "a wedding?" He smiled. It was our reception committee, who let off fire-crackers as we approached, to welcome "the distinguished foreign friend from the capital". There is a mystique about the capital in China and now some of its grandeur was descending on me. I was put up in a room in a peasant home newly whitewashed and especially furnished for the occasion. After the inevitable welcoming feast, washed down with local firewater, I turned in early, the journey by train and jeep having taken a dozen hours. Next morning the Village Head and

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Party Secretary came soon after dawn to take me on a tour of the village. The first sight they showed me was the new pond. They were clearly proud of it and I did my best to be impressed, but in my heart I thought. "Hm. a pond." It seemed nothing to get excited about even though it was deep and stone lined, it was only a few yards across. In my urban ignorance, after 13 years in China, I had no understanding of what it meant in this waterless village in the periodically drought-stricken Taihang region of arid North China. It was a matter of life and death to the villagers but it took me a long time to realise what it meant to them.

Later in the day I was taken to the school in the old temple where in 1948 we had attended meetings. Two of the pictures in our book on the commune are of the school. One shows a teenaged schoolboy standing on his head, surrounded by smiling schoolmates in the playground. Twenty-five years later, back in Ten Mile Inn, we showed it to a group of villagers. They burst out laughing and pushed the acrobat forward. He was still not more than 40 but his hair was grey, presumably due to some dietary deficiency. But he was still spry and nimble and was a leading village entrepreneur, cycling over the Taihang mountains to buy and bring back on his carrier carefully selected piglets, which he fattened up for the market. Another picture is of a classroom with the young teacher, standing in front of the blackboard on which he had written: "Science is no mystery." His text was taken from a 1959 editorial in the Party newspaper, The People's Daily, headed: "Toppling Idols and Smashing Superstitions". The teacher introduced it with the words: 'Some people have an inferiority complex about science. What is an inferiority complex? It is looking down on yourself. Well, there's nothing to be afraid of about science. Anyone who works can master it ... ' That was the spirit of the Great Leap Forward which, for all its excesses and impracticalities, did much to liberate the people's thinking and the forces of production.

One recollection of the Ten Mile Inn school in 1959 could not be photographed, though it might have been recorded. I was asked to speak to an assembly of the whole school, students and teachers, in the temple courtyard playground. I stood on the temple steps which had once been the platform of land reform work team spokesmen, and started to speak - in Chinese; but my interpreter colleague stopped me. "Why not speak in English and let me interpret?" I'm not sure why he made the suggestion. Was my Chinese so incomprehensible? Did he just want to make himself useful? Anyway, I obliged and started to speak in English. A roar of laughter



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echoed round the courtyard. The pupils had never heard such strange sounds as emerged from my mouth. Though science was no mystery, foreign languages obviously were. They must have known that such phenomena existed but had no idea of how they would sound. When Isabel and I returned to the village twenty-five years later the school had its own teacher of English and all the senior classes were studying it.

My week in Ten Mile Inn in 1959 passed fast and inspired me to write a glowing article about the newly emerging peoples communes for the British Labour Monthly. More important it inspired Isabel and me to return the next year to gather material for a whole book on the subject: The First Years of Yangyi Commune.

The book was published six years after that second visit in 1966. I became diffident about it in later years because of the official repudiation of the people's communes as an attempt to start running towards communism before the earlier stage of socialism was completed. But our paean of praise to the communes is a record of those years and of our own thinking at the time. And history, social or personal, should not be chopped and changed to accord with the tastes of the times. Our enthusiasm for the communes at the time we wrote is summed up in the opening words of the book: "One fifth of mankind live in people's communes. To turn a blind eye to such a social organism is to deny a primary fact of twentieth-century life. For the commune, whether one likes it or not, has taken root and flourishes." That last sentence, history has proved false. We tried to prove it true.

The pictures I took bring the book, the people and ourselves to life. There are photos of the murals on the village walls which express the spirit of the times: a brawny peasant straddling two hill-tops and wielding a mighty sledge-hammer with which he cleaves the mountains to build roads and irrigation works; two young farmers, a man and a woman, she clutching a sickle, he a hammer, both advancing with giant strides through the air, like winged Mercuries. There is a photo of a stonefaced channel high up in the hills. Less than six feet wide it confines the water which before tumbled in countless brooks down the slope to form a wide but shallow stream. This is what the peasants of the Great Leap called "Leading the water up the mountains". There is a tractor with a smiling driver at the wheel - a pigtailed girl. There is a group of local firework makers holding seven-foot long rockets which they claimed could fly into the sky and disperse threatening clouds of hail. There is a group of

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charming young villagers, the girls in simple flowered cotton prints, actors and actresses of a county drama group. And there they are again, in another photo sitting in the same places but dressed in the flamboyant costumes of the traditional local opera, with painted masks, flowing beards or long pigtales, crowns on their heads and pennants on their shoulders to symbolize the numbers of their big battalions. The theatrical pretensions of these peasant youths seemed to symbolize the pretensions of the times. There are pictures of communal kindergartens and canteens. And finally a series of posters of the shape of things to come in the next decade; commune industrialization, "chemicalization", mechanization and electrification of agriculture; all-round water conservation and irrigation. A revolutionary romantic dream? Perhaps so in some respects. There is no progress without dreams.

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**Study and Study Groups**

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But dreams are not enough. there must be practice - and theory. Engels said that the British were strong in organization but weak in theory. In that last respect, at least, despite my identity problems, I am truly British. Perhaps that is why, after committing myself to communism in the early '30s, and at first accepting Stalin as the infallible leader of the world communist movement, I was tempted for a time by Trotsky - without ever reading his works. Despite these ideological meanderings I was not tempted to revert to religion. My belief in Marxism never wavered, but it took on a new emphasis. Starting with my reading of Lenin's State and Revolution, after experiencing the role of the state in Harlan, Kentucky, I had gone on to read the Marxist-Leninist classics from Marx's Capital to Lenin's Imperialism. In China, in the '50s I moved on to "the Thought of Mao Ze-dong", which I considered the Marxism-Leninism of the time and of the place I was in - a newly liberated semi-colonial country. The more I read of Mao, the more my belief ripened into faith. And I was no doubter of little faith - except on one point: population control. In China, for thousands of years, happiness had been associated with children, or more specifically with sons. They were the parents' hope for sustenance in old age, their social insurance. Daughters were a liability, for after being nurtured in childhood, they were married off into the home of their husband's family. So female infanticide was winked at. But as to sons, the more the merrier. This attitude was not shaken by Liberation. In fact it was strengthened by "learning from the Soviet Union". There millions of lives had been lost in World War II and population increase was urgently called for; birth control was denounced as "neo-Malthusianism". China had lost more millions of men and women in war and famine than the Soviet Union, but she lagged behind in economic development and urgently needed birth control. Nevertheless Mao fell for the Soviet anti-"neo-Malthusianism," line, saying that those who opposed uncontrolled increase of population could "see only the people's mouths, not their hands". For once I was wise, not after the event but at the time. In 1961 I made a marginal note in a volume of Mao's works, questioning his wisdom. Wouldn't the people's standard of living rise faster, I asked, if there were fewer people? But in general, if Mao said or did anything which struck me as questionable I took it for granted either that I did not know all the facts, while he did; or his analysis was right and mine wrong. My task in study was to absorb the ideas, not to question them. This was the attitude I had long held towards Stalin, which had permitted me cheerfully to do deeds, first in Spain, then in

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Shanghai, which to-day I regret. Who was I to question the words and deeds of great revolutionary leaders? Such modesty has turned out not always to be a virtue.

My faith was maintained for decades in China by individual and collective study.

When we were in the Liberated Areas the rule for students, teachers and government personnel was to do two hours of political study before breakfast every day - as far as wartime conditions allowed. The only refreshment during this time was hot water. I grew to take this procedure for granted, so that even in 1950 (by which time we were in Beijing) I once reported to the Party Secretary that the school President, who lived next door to us, was not doing his pre-breakfast political study. He was not a communist but a Democratic Personage, who had been praised by Zhou En-lai for his contributions to the revolution. But I considered study an iron-clad rule and I had long since outgrown my British schoolboy tabu on sneaking. By now loyalty to my peers had given way to loyalty to the Party. Though I could not belong to the Chinese Communist Party (not being Chinese) I zealously upheld its institutions.

For the first few years after entering liberated Beijing Isabel and I did our early morning study and attended group study sessions with our Chinese colleagues. My limited command of the Chinese language made me feel frustrated during discussions, but I enjoyed the comradeship, which went so far at times as to give me some criticism. This made me feel that I was really accepted. At one meeting the Party Secretary said: "We must give our foreign comrade some help." "I don't want help," I said, "I want criticism." "That's what I mean," he replied.

When a few more Britishers arrived towards the end of 1949 it became possible to set up an English-language study group. I jumped at the chance of joining it, but Isabel did not. This was not only because she understands Chinese better than I (though I like to believe that I speak better than she does). Having been born in China into a family with long associations and fast ties with the country, she has always felt more strongly than I about integration into Chinese society and at times has favoured our taking Chinese citizenship. I have also favoured integration, but less single-mindedly, my emotional and cultural attachments being divided between China, Britain and U.S.A., where in a sense I grew up. And I have never wanted to give up my British

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citizenship. This is partly, I think, because of my cultural background and functional illiteracy in Chinese; partly because of my incurable wanderlust. I still want to feel free to travel, which I imagine will be easier with a British than a Chinese passport.

The first wave of British immigrants to newly liberated Beijing consisted of the four Communists: Douglas Springhall, his wife Janet, Michael Shapiro and Alan Winnington. Isabel and I welcomed them warmly but they were somewhat surprised to find other English-speaking communists already in Beijing. Winnington was suspicious of us, but Springhall had known me in Spain, so eventually we were invited to join the four newcomers in occasional discussions of events in Britain, in China, in the international Communist movement. These informal sessions gradually evolved, under the influence of the Chinese institution, into a regular study group, which grew throughout the fifties as more Britishers arrived to work mostly at the Foreign Languages Press or as teachers. We were all former members of the British C.P. but we had our differences. So long as the mellow and mature Springy lived differences of ideas, temperament and life style did not decline into disunity. After his death from cancer in 1953, however, the group tended to split into two factions. The root of the differences was: how much of the Thought of Mao Ze-dong applied to Britain and how far should we go, for instance, in practising criticism and self-criticism and ideological remoulding (which Alan Winnington said reminded him more of Moral Rearmament than Marxism); how much should we try and merge with Chinese society and how much should we retain of our British identity. The chief representative of the "True Born Englishman" was Winnington; the hundred per cent pro-Chinese spokesman was Michael Shapiro. Isabel and I found Winnington intelligent, amusing and professionally accomplished, as a journalist; but politically and ideologically we supported Shapiro. We found both of them equally arrogant.

After Springhall's death in Moscow, where he had gone for medical treatment, Janet Springhall brought his ashes to Beijing for burial. She also brought back critical observations of the Soviet Union, its racism, corruption and bureaucracy. I was not, at that time prepared to accept these observations and considered Janet something of a traitor to the cause. Despite my Trotskyist waverings of fifteen years before I was still not prepared to believe that such things were possible in the land of my early ideals. (In fact I could hardly believe

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them when I saw them myself only a few years later). My loyalty to the Soviet Union was expressed at the time of the Hungarian events of 1956. We happened to be having a get-together of our study group the very evening that the news of the rising came through. The atmosphere was tense when I arrived and some members struck me as semi-hysterical as they reported what had happened. I took it calmly. "Why shouldn't the Soviet Red Army put down an American-backed fascist uprising in a socialist country?" I asked. My faith was not to be shaken until differences emerged between the Soviet Union and China. Even then I was slow to acknowledge them. In 1960 there was an international conference of Communist Parties at which Khrushchev referred to "things being done in a certain socialist country which would make Lenin turn in his grave". "You see," said our English friend Margaret, "Khrushchev is attacking Mao Ze-dong." "What, Khrushchev attack Mao! Impossible," I replied. In fact from the establishing of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China in 1949 I had naively wondered why there should be any security precautions between the two states. As to differences between brother parties and mutual recriminations among their leaders - it was unthinkable. It became thinkable soon enough, other members of our study group being more politically astute than I, notably Michael Shapiro. He spotted an article in some Soviet publication which summed up the failure of the artels. These were communistic organizations of peasants set up in the Soviet Union in the early twenties. "Why do you think they're digging this stuff up now?" asked Michael. "It's an attack on the Chinese people's communes." This struck me as far-fetched. As a child my emotional and intellectual needs had been satisfied by religious belief in god - one god. This had been replaced as I grew up by belief in Marxism, one and indivisible; there was no place in it for dualism (to say nothing of an unholy trinity). Trotsky had been a political anti-Christ from whose devilish clutches I had escaped. How could the Chinese and Soviet parties be at loggerheads? That concept was still beyond my ken.