

CONFESSIONS ABOUT WAR AND ECONOMICS

by

Marvin Green

In Belgium in 1945, Peter (I didn't know his last name then and still don't) used to hang around the caserns, where the American noncoms who worked at the Shell office building were billeted. I glimpsed him from time to time. He was a stocky British army captain. He seemed lonesome, and indeed I'd been cautioned that "the captain wants companionship." A nice looking guy, freckles and sandy, wavy hair, I'm remembering him that way even today.

My room was impossibly hot and humid. I was always barefoot and naked except for my shorts. Captain Peter knocked one morning, and I admitted him. Given in those days to grand gestures, I bowed and swept him in, raced to the one chair to remove my foot-and-a-half pile of khaki shirts, handkerchiefs, socks, trousers and underwear, and then seated myself on the bed.

He was hunting his jacket for a smoke, so I proffered a Lucky Strike, which I could buy at the PX for the Belgian franc equivalent of only a nickel a pack. I myself never smoked but was known for freely handing out American cigarettes to my Belgian friends in the taverns I frequented. (I cultivated such reputations.) I also carried a Zippo lighter that I never used for myself. I flicked it on, extended it to him and realized that Now-I'm-in-for-it. You see, if my tiny room had any

ventilation at all, it was lousy and all but incapable of doing anything about the heat.

Peter had that upper-upper erudite British accent and introduced himself simply as Peter. In a paper sack he'd brought a bottle of Remy-Martin cognac. He took it out, waved it around for due credit, produced two snifters from the breast pockets of his jacket and poured each of us a good three-finger shot.

"I'm informed," he said, "that you're the American economics prodigy. You're from your University of Chicago and I assume you're an integral part of that whole laissez faire crew over there. We have our weekly Tuesday economics seminar and would very much like you to come over tomorrow evening to present your Chicago point of view."

"OK," I said.

I was a fraud, of course. As to being a "prodigy," I was only 18 years old and had spread the word that I had graduated from the University of Chicago, which was true in a way. I had a gift for fiction writing and could weave a story out of anything. I had smatterings of information about many things and could weave (I placed out on all of the entrance exams and was eligible to go directly into one of the professional schools, such as law or medicine or divinity). I was an accomplished bull shit artist. As to economics, however, I knew less than zero except that - no kidding, absolute zero - about economics except

that supply and demand curves could be studied mathematically. As to a "Chicago point of view," what the hell could that be? speaking. determine and manipulate their shapes? That's what I was wondering.

The war in Europe was over, and the Army had established a point system for eligibility to go home rather than to be transferred to an Asian combat unit so as to get killed in Japan. There were over 4,000,000 of us in Europe, and "Stars and Stripes" had printed our theme song, a parody to the tune of "Lilly Marlene":

Please, Mr. Truman, won't you send us home?
We've captured Napoli and liberated Rome.
Now that we've whipped the Master Race
We know you have the shipping space.
So why not send us home?
Let the boys back home see Rome.

Well, you got so many points for having been in actual combat and additional points for actual wounds suffered therein. I had virtually zero points. For me, there'd be an interminable wait for shipping space.

To keep us constructively occupied while waiting, the Army established schools. I contrived to be chosen to teach "Psychology." (In my one year at the University of Chicago, I never attended any classes but picked up bits and pieces from my fraternity brothers who were serious about learning.)

When you're a glib kid with a good mouth, you simply spin stories and intersperse them with smatterings of subject matter relevance. Time after time I'd get the top student evaluations and students got on waiting lists to get into my classes. (What a fraud I was and what a fraud I am!)

(I did make some enemies. A fellow teacher became an enemy. He had enough points to go home, back to Texas. At his farewell celebration the night before he left, he got roaring drunk, backed me into a corner and grabbed my throat. Spraying vomit all over me, he said, "Asshole, you hold forth as if you know what you're talking about.") I could easily make up stories about psychology. As to the economics that Peter wanted, I was actually thinking of going back to Chicago to study economics whenever the Army would finally discharge me.

- 0 -

In the summer of 1946, when the bathroom plumbing failed at our fraternity house at the University of Chicago, we'd slip across University Avenue to take our showers in Bartlett Gym. Most of us were World War II veterans.

I mention this because H.T., my future law partner, had vivid vertical scars up and down the left side of his chest.

"Jesus, H.T.," I said. "What the hell?"

"Battle of the Bulge," he answered.

Canadian troops had liberated the French port of Le Havre in September, 1944. My Army Harbor Craft Company then moved in and operated the port. We had tug boats, barges, marine cranes and the 26-foot J-boats that delivered mail and supplies and that sometimes we used for gutsy recreational excursions into the English Channel.

It turned out that H.T. was one of the 1,500 guys a Nazi E-boat torpedoed in the English Channel as they approached Le Havre one afternoon. I went out on a J-boat that made maybe 20 trips, bucking 5-foot waves and hauling in those poor SOBs. At the tavern that night, everybody wanted to know the details of the rescue. Glib indeed! I must have embellished my efforts just a wee bit. I mean I don't know how I got back to my billet. All I remember is that everybody was toasting me and buying me drinks.

Over 4,000,000 U.S. soldiers disembarked onto the European continent at Le Havre. Whether you walked off your ship or were fished out of the Channel, chances are our 358th Harbor Company put you onto a truck and shipped you to one of the cigarette camps—Camp Lucky Strike, Camp Philip Morris, Camp Old Gold, Camp 20 Grand.

The cigarette camps were replacement depots—we called them "repple depples." Interesting how the cigarette motif was so prevalent everywhere during the war. In those Hollywood movies

we saw, if a soldier was dying, his buddy or his medic always lit a last cigarette for him.

OK, here's what happened to lots of those 4,000,000 guys during World War II. If you're one of them, such as H.T. was, you're 18 years old; you're fresh from 13 weeks of infantry basic training; you've been put onto a troop ship; to your relief you've crossed the Atlantic safely; and now you're in a repple depple (Camp Philip Morris in H.T.'s case); you get a rifle and combat equipment. In just two or three days more, you find yourself scared shitless in a front line foxhole. Somebody's actually shooting at you. In fact that shooter asshole's using live ammunition, and you realize you're replacing somebody—some other human target—who'd been killed or else badly wounded. This whole WW II thing is a horrible mistake.

When H.T. went on his first five or six patrols, his squad leader didn't even know his name. H.T, was just in time for the Battle of the Bulge. It was Christmas time in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium.

- 0 -

Mindful as I am about the dozens of my Hungarian relatives who died in the concentration camps, looking back from today is different. For an 18-year old soldier kid from Lansford, Pa. (population 9,632 in the 1930 census), the war inducted me into the world. I personally knew just two of the relatives. My

cousin Paul lived with us for six months in 1929 when I was four years old. My cousin Anush visited us before the war. I was 14 then. Her visa ran out, and she set sail back to Europe. The exact date was August 31, 1939. It was the very next day that the Nazis marched into Poland.

A few years ago I went to the Holocaust Museum in Washington and tried to see if I could spot Anush in the photographs in the Hungarian section. All of the women were naked. Their heads were shaved. I'd often imagined Anush naked, but I'd never actually seen her naked.

- 0 -

What is history? Julius Caesar is dead. My cousin Paul is dead. My cousin Anush is dead. Years and years later, H.T. is dead from an embolism in his lungs. He was my partner but I didn't go to his funeral. I didn't want to see him as a dead body. That's not how I knew him. Clive of India is dead. When I was ten years old, I saw a movie in which 123 out of 146 persons supposedly died in the Black Hole of Calcutta in 1756. Quite Probably the Black Hole never really happened, but I remain scared and, in fact, claustrophobic. As Columbia University Professor Edward Said wrote in *Orientalism* in 1978, once something is said often enough, it becomes true.

I've looked up major natural disasters in the almanacs, and I've consulted the disaster data base that's available on the

internet. It says that worldwide 20,000,000 died in 1917 from an epidemic. One of them was one of my father's sister Mathilda. Another was the father of my cousin George, whom I met in Tunbridge Wells, an English city in what was known as "buzz-bomb alley" during World War II.

The Nazi Holocaust was a human—not a natural—disaster, but supposedly 6,000,000 persons died, including Anush, but nowadays there are "deniers," who say the Holocaust never happened. They're just applying Professor Said's principle: the Holocaust has become true.

Holocaust or no Holocaust, KP duty or not KP duty, I loved World War II, looking back on it, I mean. If I don't weep for Caesar, why should I weep for the uncles and aunts and cousins and the 6,000,000 others I never met. I think the Holocaust actually happened, but today there's nothing we can do about it.

- 0 -

Captain Peter came back to my mind in 1951 when British officials Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defected to Russia. He'd graduated from Cambridge, and Burgess and Maclean were part of the "Cambridge Comintern." In 1963 their Cambridge colleague Kim Philby also defected.

Back to his visit that day in Brussels, Captain Peter got in his Jeep and took me to his weekly Tuesday economics seminar. He and some other British soldiers, mostly Cambridge buddies, I

believe, had rented an apartment, stocked it with a mimeograph machine, and used it as the headquarters for their seminars and also to print and distribute their political pamphlets.

He'd brought a box of cigars and passed it around. I took one and said, "I smoke these to try to look older."

"My God, man," a tall, skinny guy said, "it's incongruous. You're the youngest Yank I've ever seen. You shouldn't even be in the bloody military."

"I'm 20—old enough, I dare say, to pitch in and help you chaps make the world safe for democracy. That's what we were accomplishing, isn't it?"

"Amazing baby features," the man said. "I'd judge 13 or 14 at the most. If I were your mother, you wouldn't be smoking."

Peter said, "I was stunned, too. But he's got his degree, hasn't he? And he's an economist—if you can call it economics that they do out there in Al Capone land. Let's hear him out."

It was liquor that saved me that difficult Tuesday night. I was pacing myself whereas everybody else was guzzling too much cognac and probably was also oxygen-deprived from the cigar and cigarette smoke. At least 10 times Peter cried out such things as, "You still haven't answered my charge. America led the world—yes, the entire world—into the 1929 depression."

Another of Peter's dismal crew, not the tall, skinny guy, said, "I can prove to you that your Federal Reserve System is

completely inadequate to cope with the business cycle. As I understand it, your Professor Henry Simons wants to monetize your National Debt. I demand that you explain how monetary manipulations can possibly put people back to work in a depression."

I'd picked up some of the evening's jargon and was able to counterattack. "I come not to bury laissez faire," I said, "or to praise it, but to figure out what you guys are crowing about. Go easy on me now. Only one of you—please don't everybody jump me all at once—one of you, step by step, using the King's English, explain to me exactly how you'll put people back to work."

Above the instantaneous clamor of voices, Peter cried out, "The entire world!"

I wasn't able to escape until about 3:00 a.m., but I'd gotten away with it. I'd remained sober and pulled off what felt like an intellectual coup. Those guys had studied under John Maynard Keynes, and they knew what they were talking about. So, totally smug, though I'd missed the last tram, I trudged five miles back to the caserne.

- 0 -

H.H. was a member of the Communist Party, but I had to find that out from two FBI agents.

When we became partners, he did all the work, and I brought in all the business. With an unusual joint academic residency in the economics department and the Law School, I'd picked up a PhD and a JD. One of the major Chicago banks hired me and quickly discovered my specialty. They put me to work making speeches to invited big business executives. Triple damage anti-trust lawsuits were the hot thing back then.

I steered hundreds of thousands of business to H.H., so that, within six months, he quit his firm and opened up his own. By putting my name first, he persuaded me to quit the bank and partner with him.

FBI agents tended to interview in pairs, so that they could corroborate each other about what a witness told them. I forget the names of the two guys who came to see me at home one night. I started calling them Heckle and Jeckle. Since H.H. and I had been doing a lot of work with the US Justice Department on our anti-trust litigation, I assumed at first that Heckle and Jeckle were doing routine background checks. They never said otherwise.

On the other hand, I had an intuition, because the cold war with Russia was going full blast. Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Rosenbergs and Judith Coplon and Alger Hiss were hitting the daily news, along with Burgess, Maclean and Klaus Fuchs and eventually Kim Philby. When I asked Heckle and Jeckle point

blank, "Does this have to do with espionage?", the bastards lied to me.