

Whitehall's Little Helpers

[Watch chronology of all this]

EACH of us peoples our own tiny universe. I don't suppose that that policeman's salute would have meant anything to most others. But it was like that gong-strike of Bombardier Billy Wells at the start of each J Arthur Rank movie. It was a gesture which left a deep imprint on my mind. It stands out as symbolic of the country that we were now leaving behind. We Irving children no longer had parents. This was nothing really new; but that policeman's salute marked the end of an era, the England into which I had been born would soon no longer exist, and that was a realisation that made me profoundly sad.

The Sikorski book was finished by the autumn of 1967, and cautiously titled *Accident*. I had interviewed more eyewitnesses and participants than the time available would have suggested. I had also realized for the first time that the London Poles and other exiled Central Europeans are the most romantic and compulsive liars when it comes to narrating the history of their own peoples: I might have approached closer to the truth by exclusively consulting the US Navy Department's resident astrologer. Nevertheless I built a pretty convincing, if only half completed suspension bridge across the inevitable gulf in the evidence. The technical and Court

of Inquiry evidence told me that it was not an accident, at least not as described; the political background gave only the British both motive and opportunity. But there was still a gap in the proof.

Unfortunately it turned out that William Kimber as my publisher had spent the summer developing theories of his own. Fears of another major libel action haunted him. Without telling me he rejigged the closing chapters to suit his views. I saw what he had done only when I received the proofs. On the day that the book came out in October 1967 a small announcement, placed by myself, appeared in the personal columns of *The Times*, dissociating myself from the published edition of the book.¹

In retrospect, now that the maturity of years has caught up with me, I have to say that there can have been few more arrogant, pretentious, obnoxious, and uncooperative authors than I was at that time (and for more than a few years since).

THE DEVELOPING CONTROVERSY surrounding the death of General Sikorski occupied the serious London newspapers for many weeks that spring of 1967. Curiosity as to what had happened, theories, letters to the press from eyewitnesses, mingled with outraged defenders of the not-long-dead hero Churchill, and puzzlement.

In those days David Frost occupied the unwholesome position now held by Max Clifford as the exploiter of unsavoury materials. He had built up intimidating viewing figures with his youthful and iconoclastic style. As anchorman to *That Was the Week that Was* (1962–3) he had become a wealthy media personality despite his, to southern English ears, insufferable, simpering, pandering, nasal, adenoidal tones. Since 1996 he had anchored Rediffusion's *The Frost Programme*; as the Sikorski debate began he sniffed the air, and found it rich with the odours of lawsuits, insults, mystery, and death, and decided that it held much promise. Encouraged perhaps by figures in Whitehall, as the records suggest, he unleashed no fewer than three programmes on the subject.

After Hochhuth's play *Soldaten* was first premiered, in (•••East?) Berlin, on •••DATE in 1967, Frost staged his first assault. He invited the wartime prime minister's wayward son Randolph Churchill as

his primary guest.* Frost also invited Kenneth Tynan – who wanted the National Theatre Company to stage the production – and myself to participate.

I did not like what happened that evening at all. As the rest of us waited in the television studio's Green Room, Randolph Churchill was inadvertently ushered in. He was immediately shown out by distracted production staff. It seemed that he was not supposed to know of our presence. The rest of us were placed initially in the front row of the audience, and not on the stage. This was one of David Frost's techniques. He instructed us to interrupt as soon as we felt proper. That was his rather rude format. As soon as Tynan and I intervened, however, Randolph Churchill swung round and snarled that he was the invited guest, and he told us to shut up. I realized that he was still in the dark about our invited presence. I am not accustomed to gatecrashing and I kept a crushed silence from that point on. Tynan put up a stout defence of his decision to stage the play.

I was aghast at this courtesy and although in the interval Frost came clean to the distinguished guest, and moved us next to him on the podium to underline the point, my embarrassment at this kind of "ambush television" never left me. Lay preacher's son he might be, but in my family we would have called David Frost an *oik* for doing this. I apologized to Randolph afterwards, but I know he did not accept it.²

On September 12, 1967 Joan Bakewell led a BBC television discussion programme with Lord Chandos, Sir Edward Bullard, and myself.

THIS Bakewell programme did have one extraordinary aftermath. As we left the studio I chatted with the powerfully built and impressive Lord Chandos. "Chap you need to see, Irving," he said in a tone of gruff condescension as he waited for his chauffeur, "is Charles Massey. R.A.F. – he was *on* that plane y'know. Injured,

too."

I pricked up my ears; there was no Massey on the official passenger list.

"Massey's Chop House," he said, without waiting for my next question. "Beauchamp Place. I'll get you his home address."

Unwittingly he had plucked out of this tangled skein one of the most unusual story-threads in the case. A few days later, on December 16, 1967, I received the promised letter came from Chandos. He stated again that Massey was a passenger in the plane and had survived. He would look for the man's address. **On December 19, I dictated to Jutta Padel a letter to Lord Chandos, asking outright, "where is Charles Massey?" Two weeks later, on January 5, 1968 I received his reply, enclosing a letter from Sir A[lan] Lascelles.** He had now heard from Sir Alan Lascelles, private secretary to the late King George VI, with Massey's current home address. Evidently this ex-R.A.F. officer, Charles William Bowes Massey, moved in exalted circles. **I went straight round to Kimber's and collected a copy of my new book *The Mare's Nest* to give to Lord Chandos and on January 19 I received a "thank you letter re: Charles Massey, from Ld. Chandos."**

IT WAS AT ABOUT this time that I called in to see Squadron Leader L A Jacket at the air ministry about access to more files. As I came into his office he quietly shuffled a buff folder out of view, but not before I saw that its title included my name, and it was stamped **MOST SECRET.**]]

I had learned that Massey lived at Pelham Court, a mansion block behind South Kensington station. A few days later I spoke my name into his door phone; Massey did not just buzz me in (I presume it was he) but suggested I "come back in a day or two for a proper chat."³ The newspapers often named me in connection with the Sikorski mystery. Nowadays, having read official files, I am aware why Massey hesitated. He may have had to ask the appropriate authorities for clearance first.

If he did, he did not get it. On the contrary, the Massey story-thread took a very remarkable twist indeed. When I returned, the

porter told me that their Mr Massey had “done a bunk” – that was his message if not the actual words. He had gone, without a trace; abandoning his business, home – and family, as it turned out.⁴

My diary for February 20, 1968: “Left flat 1:30 p.m. … Drove on to Pelham Court SW7, and there learned from office manager that “Charles Massey” was Rhodesian ex-R.A.F. type, injured during war, who did a moonlight flit ‘about September’ last year!” So he had vanished at the time the uproar over the Sikorski plane crash began. I began to wonder whether Massey might even be the plane’s missing second pilot, presumed dead since 1943! “I have some leads to follow. Left items at Kimber’s. … Drove to Central Ref. Library.”

For thirty years I left it at that. I should not have dropped the ball, but as an impecunious young writer I just did not have the resources that newspapers have. The book was out, and I closed the file.

NEARLY THIRTY YEARS later, it all suddenly came back, in a kind of peristalsis. It was August 1996 when the Massey mystery suddenly returned. My four children were all grown up, and I now had a second family. I was in southern France with Bente and our three year old Jessica, working on the second volume of my Churchill biography. From a payphone in the French village square I called my Duke Street telephone voicemail and found that a stranger had left a message to call her. I called back.⁵ A man answered. “Mr Irving? My wife Carolyn has been trying to reach you. She’s the daughter of Charles Massey, does this ring a bell –?”

It did, even after thirty years. “General Sikorski’s plane crash,” I said, filling in the blank.

“Precisely,” he said. “She has just been going through his papers, and, well, she had better tell you herself.”

The cramped phone cell seemed to rock gently. What did nshe want? It occurred to me that as recently as March, *The Sunday Times* had asked to borrow my only copy of my book on the crash.⁶

There might still be an innocent explanation for the strange story that Massey’s daughter told me when she phoned the *Auberge* at five pm the next evening; it is possible; not probable, but

possible.

She had grown up believing her father had died nearly thirty ago, she said. It was the way she put those words together that made me catch my breath. Last Wednesday, August 14, she had discovered that he had in fact died only one year before, in Cheltenham, aged eighty-two. She was shocked. She was her father's favourite daughter, several photos of her were found in his rooms, and now she had just learned this. Going through family correspondence subsequently, she had found a book on the Sikorski controversy, with letters from me to her mother in 1968 tucked inside it, and she wanted to get to the bottom of it all. In thirty years, fortunately, my address had not changed.

I told her of my visit to Pelham Place when the porter said he had vanished without trace. In fact, she replied, he had secretly gone to Cheltenham, and lived there under a false identity while rumours, untrue, went round the family that he had gone to prison for ten years and was long dead. She now believed the government gave her father a new identity in 1968, after my visit; and that he had lived under that identity for the next ten years before resuming his old name of Massey. He died a few months ago, on June 27, 1995, under the name Charles Massey in Cheltenham, a respected figure.⁷ As a child, she had heard him tell of the "colossal compensation" he was expecting to receive one day from the R.A.F.; he did not say for what.

Still following a thirty-year-old train of thought, I asked if she had ever heard of a pilot called "Kipper" Herring; and was she sure her father's *real* name was Charles Massey? To the first question she said "no," to the second she seemed suddenly unsure. What could she believe, now?

"What was your father during the war?"

"A squadron leader in the R.A.F.," she replied.

I recommended that she apply to the R.A.F. personnel branch, asking to see her late father's personnel file. True, the book was long published but I admitted to what I called a "prurient" interest in seeing the Sikorski case finally closed.

CAROLYN PHONED AGAIN the next morning.⁸ She mentioned late in this conversation that she had lived in Marbella herself, and felt close to her "late" father like that. He had talked incessantly of Gibraltar and plane-crashes and once said cryptically to her, "Remember, I 'died in a plane crash.'" That was not the kind of sentence one made up – or forgets.

Massey had appointed Terence Simms as his executor, describing him to Carolyn's bafflement as "next of kin." Simms was proving difficult, she said. After talking with me, she had spent five hours talking with the woman who had shared her father's last years, Karita Lynn; she had wrung her name out of Simms. Charles Massey had once promised Karita he would leave her everything, and claimed that his papers were "worth vast sums of money". Upon his death, she had felt entitled to take only bric-à-brac like his watch, picture frames, a picture of him as a chef, and some R.A.F. medals; there were no "journals" – so who got the papers?

I remarked that in certain circumstances the authorities would have immediately cleansed his effects. As for the photos, they showed him before his disappearance in 1967, and then again since the 1980s. Italian-born society portrait painter Pietro Annigoni liked to paint him, and one of the photos showed him in Annigoni's studio viewing the portrait of his first wife Pamela in about 1962–4.⁹ The room was hung with many R.A.F. photos, none of which appeared to show Charles however; and none in R.A.F. uniform. In 1943 Massey would have been thirty; he was six-feet-four. Simms, the executor, said he had been present at his 1995 funeral. He said a very important man, an air chief-marshall, had arrived from London in full uniform and a chauffeur-driven car, perhaps a somewhat excessive tribute for a wartime squadron-leader (••).

After I returned from France in October 1996 Carolyn phoned again, having pursued inquiries I had suggested. A 1994 press clipping indicated that he flew [Sir Godfrey] Huggins, the Rhodesian premier. She now had his 1994 diary, which entered the correct birthday as known to her. A day or two later she visited me with the file she had extracted from the ministry; for my own part, I

had dug out my own 1968 papers relating to the hunt for Massey.¹⁰ An unusual feature about the air ministry file was that different forms gave five different dates of birth; in a letter written to Katrina on May 1, 1995, seven weeks before his death, he admitted that there was a two-year discrepancy which he would have to explain to her one day.

She had discovered that her father's first wife, Pamela Scott-Payne, had lived in Hampton Court, Portsmouth Road, Surbiton during the war; she might still be alive. By a process of elimination she had identified the Air Chief Marshal who attended her father's funeral as Sir William Wratten.¹¹ She had phoned Wratten, said she was Massey's daughter, and asked why he was at the funeral; there was an appalled silence, followed by the rather weak explanation: "My wife knew him." Wratten proved unforthcoming, but he did mention that he now owned the painting of a Mosquito bomber which was visible in photos of Massey's room.¹² Massey had served, according to his Temporary Form 543, in No. 44 or No. 510 Squadron at the time; there were references in the file to postings to Gibraltar, to Coastal Command, and to R.A.F. Transport Command headquarters at Lyneham.

After his 1967 disappearance, there had been silence for nearly ten years. Her mother Verena (his second wife) married again. In about 1975 or perhaps 1976 she had received a message with letters stuck onto paper like a blackmail note, reading only: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CHARLES? Carolyn now suspected that the note was from her father – she had always known him gluing things onto paper, photos and the like. After her death all Verena's papers were destroyed by Carolyn's stepfather; only a book* by Carlos Thompson on the Sikorski controversy had survived – Thompson claimed to have visited Massey on January 10, 1968 – and Carolyn had found

* Carlos Thompson, *The Assassination of Winston Churchill* (Gerrards Cross, page ...). He got to Massey first on January 10, 1968. First that day he had visited Lord Chandos: Chandos confirmed that Massey had claimed to a mutual friend at St James Club (presumably Sir Alan Lascelles) that he was on the plane. To Thompson, a few hours later that day Massey flatly denied it. His disappearance followed.

folded-up letters from me and Thompson to her mother tucked inside.* Charles Massey had quietly resurfaced in Cheltenham in about 1980 without contacting his family.

By January 1997 Carolyn had begun to ask herself questions, like where her father had obtained the money to start the Chop House. The puzzle became more baffling each month. Carolyn's aunt, her mother's sister, did know that Charles had suffered injuries in a plane crash and had plates in his head. At the time of the disappearance, Lord Chandos called in Mrs Verena Massey and made her sign the Official Secrets Act. The two sisters had puzzled on what the secret could possibly be. There was one other clue: before his disappearance, Massey had told Verena he was working at an address connected with the restaurant industry. After he vanished she went round there to ask after him: they had never heard of him.

I advised Carolyn to make a formal inquiry of the Cabinet Office Historical Section.¹³ Lord Chandos is now long dead, and his papers are deposited at the Churchill archives in Cambridge; the last time I looked, his file on the Sikorski mystery and the play *Soldiers* had been closed to researchers. As said, an innocent explanation for all this was possible, but not probable.

Chronology only: *In November 1967 I was in Toronto, for a live interview on CTV (check). They had invited Prchal over from California.*

The play *Soldiers* was premiered in English in Toronto in February 1968, and Hochhuth invited us to attend. The production was by Clifford Williams, with Timothy West (•) portraying Churchill.¹⁴ It was the first time I had met Kenneth Tynan (right? •), the drama critic and *bon viveur*, who would be bringing the play later to London. [Expand on him and Kathleen. Structure note: was all of this Toronto visit therefore before the three Frost programmes?]

Since the Lord Chamberlain had prevented its staging in London, the London theatre nobility flew out to Toronto to see it, before its staging in New York and – eventually – London in 1968.

We left the four children in Norah's charge in Paddington, and made our first transatlantic flight. The face of aviation was changing every year. In those days airliners were relatively short-winded, and ours had to refuel at Shannon on the west coast of Ireland on the way over; in 1977, on a family excursion to Los Angeles we still had to refuel in Winnipeg; and even in 1992, flying to Johannesburg, the SAA Jumbo's pilot announced nonchalantly that as he was "running a bit low" he was going to land at Windhoek to refuel. Now the sky's giants take everything in their stride.

TORONTO WAS SIX FEET DEEP in snow. Every metal doorknob in the air-conditioned hotel released an electric spark to the approaching fingers. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) paid for our tickets, and asked me to be a guest challenger on television's longest running panel show *Front Page Challenge* on February 26, 1968.¹⁵ It was the first time I had ever seen a woman don a blonde wig; the panellist Betty Kennedy did so in the Green Room before the show began. I was learning something about the little deceits of television all the time. The half-hour quiz show itself was fun; the panel had to identify a mystery challenger connected to a front-page news item. Fearing the total ignorance of the guests, I dropped a couple of hints ("Britain's last colony in Europe" – "Gibraltar!") before the team guessed my identity – it would have been perhaps awkward otherwise.

Having neither that team's knowledge of geography nor a rental car in Ontario, we were bored during our three days in Toronto (•); to our chagrin, on our way back to the airport we passed road signs showing we had been only an hour away from the Niagara Falls, and Pilar never got to see the spectacle. I mention this because, like the Reichenbach Falls where Sherlock Holmes met his end, those on the Niagara later marked the beginning of the nearly worldwide ban on me; and as things turned out, this was not the last time I had featured on Canada's front pages.

In London, Michael White (•) staged the play *Soldiers* at the West End's New Theatre in December 1968; at Tynan's invitation I had privately put a couple of thousand pounds into its production. This gained us front-row seats on opening night; as the curtain came down I was the one who applauded loudly in the darkness and called for the author. Reviews were good, but tailed off after *The Sunday Times*'s Harold Hobson – Tynan's professional rival – rubbished it; Hobson's daughter, it turn out, was married to Lord Chandos's son. For two or three nights attendance was good, but Prime Minister Harold Wilson denounced the play in the House of Commons as "anti-British" and audience figures collapsed.¹⁶

It was an odd phenomenon to experience from the inside. It was the reverse of what would have happened in many other countries. As for the money, of course I never saw it again.

The Churchill family started to kick out, not in the public arena but in clubland, if I can put it like that. Randolph and his son Winston, now twenty-seven, decided that I would have to be destroyed by whatever means were possible. They funded an unknown writer to destroy my name and hired lawyers to back him up. (Winston Jr. boasted of this in his excellent biography of his father Randolph.) [Quote that book on Randolph for this.]

Thus it was that a strange figure entered our lives: tall, dashing, handsome, well-spoken, cosmopolitan, and with seemingly bottomless resources, "Carlos Thompson" introduced himself to us as a *bon biveur*, globetrotter, and would-be writer. (His real name turns out to have been Schaftner; whether he was Jewish never occurred to me.) Thompson was a swashbuckling, out-of-work actor of Argentine descent, a heartthrob aged forty-four.¹⁷ He was one of our last visitors in Paddington, before we moved to Mayfair. He was writing a book about the Sikorski plane-crash, he explained, as he planted his impressive new attaché case on the low coffee table between us; he talked to us for an hour or two, mostly about himself, if my memory is correct. His elegant Argentine-flavoured Spanish and his gaucho courtesies made an impression on Pilar, of course. He kept asking me oddly phrased leading questions [expand

from the diary?] I recall that I explained Rolf's more tempestuous and exuberant utterances with the words, "You must remember, he is a Child of the Arts."

In his favour were his good looks and his substantial wealth, provided by the Churchills and his wife of ten years, Hollywood actress Lilli Palmer, born Lillie Marie Peiser, a faded Jewish beauty nine years his senior – what would nowadays be called a "cougar"; she had fled Poland and in her time she had enjoyed both fortune as the ex-wife of the actor Rex Harrison and fame in her own right.¹⁸

Thompson, as the official files now show, had willingly accepted the Churchill family's commission to heap slops upon my name. At the time of his visit however I saw no reason to mistrust him and it was only forty years later, reading the papers of Marshal of the R.A.F. Sir John Slessor, in the Public Record Office, that I realised that this stranger had been put massively in funds by the Churchill family with just one intention – to exact revenge for my book *The Destruction of Dresden*. Money was accordingly no object to him. As *Der Spiegel* wrote at the time, "*Er stieg nur in den teuersten Hotels ab*" – he checked into only the costliest of hotels. He was a hired gun. He flew first class to Johannesburg and Los Angeles and elsewhere, tracking down leads and clues; and he started work on a book, *The Assassination of Winston Churchill*, which was eventually to be distributed by a publisher in Buckinghamshire who had been in business only since 1966. It contained a string of seemingly deliberate libels.

[[In 1969 I instructed my solicitors Rubinstein, Nash & Co to issue a libel writ, as the Churchill clique had no doubt intended. To their fury, the book trade panicked and withdrew it from sale. The action proceeded slowly; after the setback of the February 1970 defeat in the PQ.17 libel action I had to husband every penny to fight the appeals which went to the House of Lords. With no alternative but to shorten the front-line, I called off the libel suit against Carlos Thompson, so that interesting battle was never fought. As is apparent from the government documents now released, the real war was boiling up behind the scenes.]]

His wife Lilli Palmer was in the dark about his real purpose, as was Rolf Hochhuth, who told me he too was charmed by Thompson's opening approaches. Later Lilli phoned Rolf despairingly to apologise, warning that Carlos had only recently discharged himself from a *Nervenheilanstalt*, and that whatever her husband's assurances to the contrary he boded Rolf no good at all. Many years later, in October 1981, Carlos Thompson acted very oddly, coming to our street door – something told me not to allow him inside – and warning me to silence if I valued my life.¹⁹ He hesitated briefly, then opened his bag to reveal a revolver, and he produced a medallion in a leather case which identified him, he said, as a major in the Mossad.²⁰ Who can say now if either was real? I closed the front door on him at once, perhaps the wisest thing I have ever done. He died by his own hand in his native Buenos Aires in 1990, shooting himself, perhaps with that very gun.

This was the unsavoury character that David Frost had elected to make his ally as he devoted his then flagship programme *Frost on Friday* (and as things developed the subsequent *Frost on Saturday* too) to destroying me personally, on December 21 and 22, 1968. He had virtually carte blanche, as he had co-founded the consortium which put together the winning London Weekend Television (LWT) franchise bid the year before. Having since then read the government files, I have little doubt that it also brought pressure to bear on either Frost or LWT or both. For weeks the newspapers had been clawing over the Sikorski plane-crash mystery, their letter columns filled with indignant letters from Sir John Colville, Sir Ian Jacobs, Sir Hastings Ismay and other members of Churchill's private staff. Since ••DATE my book *Accident* was in the bookstores too.

Frost's producer telephoned to ask if I would take part in a programme a night or two later devoted both to Sikorski and the R.A.F. saturation bombing, the parallel motifs of Hochhuth's *Soldiers*. Ken Tynan would be there too. I naively suggested that they invite Maurice Smith, the "master bomber" in the first (No. 5 Bomber Group) raid on Dresden, and Sikorski's pilot, Edward

Prchal, from California, and I provided their addresses.

“Get on to the Imperial War Museum,” I added, warming to the idea. “Borrow a Mae West lifejacket and, when the cameras are live, produce it to Prchal and see if even in full daylight he can put it on, tie all the straps and inflate it in the seventeen seconds he had while his plane was taking off and crashing in the darkness off Gibraltar!”

It would have been good television, agreed the producer, phoning me back later; but they had concluded it would be “too costly” to fly Prchal over.

Just before I left for the LWT studio that Friday evening, William Kimber rang. “Look, about the book and your advert in *The Times*,” he pleaded. “Can we agree to bury the hatchet on that? If either of us is asked about that, let’s agree now that we each reply that we have no comment.”

I was glad to oblige. Frost did raise the matter, and I deflected his question with a non-committal reply.

IN THE MEN’S ROOM at the studio I caught sight of a familiar Eastern European face above the stall next to mine. It was the Czech pilot, Edward Prchal from California. This was the first indication I had that Frost’s team was playing with marked cards. From that instant his ambush rolled like clockwork.

At a cocktail party some years later his floor manager enlightened me on the programme’s dirty tricks. The audience was not neutral; it was handpicked, loaded against one party or other, but that was not all. “The loudspeakers around the auditorium were connected to Frost’s table microphone, but not necessarily to yours. The gain on Frost’s microphone was greater than on his victim’s. It was more sensitive,” he explained. When David Frost’s preferred guests came on, illuminated signs instructed the audience: APPLAUSE. “When you came on, you got the other sign: SILENCE.” And so on. There was of course no sign of any Mae West life jacket. Had I been told that Prchal was coming, I would have brought one in myself.

Wing Commander Maurice Smith was present, in the front row “ambush” slot. We exchanged a handshake, as I had always liked

him. He was a gentleman. At my suggestion, Douglas Martin had also been brought down from Birmingham, and was further back in the audience; he was the SOE wireless operator who had been looking out to sea from high up on the Rock that night, and had witnessed the crash, and had seen a second figure climbing out of the top of the plane as it settled into the sea.

A floor technician brought in Carlos Thompson (APPLAUSE), carrying the attaché case we had seen in our drawing room in Paddington. It concealed a hidden tape recorder, which played – to me totally unintelligible – snatches of our dialogue; but of course hidden tape recorders, and this dashing Argentinean investigator, made it look as though something really sinister had been caught on tape. Frost grinned oafishly. It was now clear that he had no intention of ambushing Prchal. Going down that route was not the way to earn an OBE at all.²¹ He allowed Prchal to tell his moving story, and made no attempt to bring in the witnesses that we had assembled in the audience – in particular Douglas Martin.

At his request, Rolf Hochhuth was waiting on a live telephone in his Swiss home. He was kept holding the line for half an hour until the intermission, then Frost casually asked me in his irritating nasal tones to go over to the phone and reassure Rolf that he would have his say after the interval. (He never got to speak, nor did Smith or Martin. But as I communicated Frost's message in German to Rolf as bidden, an unseen boom microphone snaked in overhead so that millions of viewers could hear me talking to someone in that sinister foreign tongue.)

Frost accused me of lying when I described my Polish interpreter as fervently anti-Soviet; he also said that I had lied when I remarked that Sir Laurence Olivier had been shown Rolf's "bank safe" document; on a further matter, whether or not William Kimber, my publisher had discussed changes he was making to my book, he also accused me of lying. He said he had discussed each point with Sir Laurence and Kimber in person, which baffled me in the light of what Kimber and I had promised each other, but Frost had not finished even now.

This Friday programme apparently did not go as well as Frost

had wanted, because he announced that he was going to have us all back the next day for *Frost on Saturday*, too. I was pleased by that, as I would come back fully prepared and even bring that life jacket; but it turned out that LWT would tape the follow-up immediately.

Since it was clear now what Frost was up to, I fought back with no holds barred. I was going to go down, but it would be with all guns blazing – like *Bismarck*. When I got back to our new flat in Duke Street, I told Pilar – who had watched the live Friday broadcast dismayed – that she would see on Saturday that I had put up a good fight against the combined powers of David Frost and LWT.

We watched the broadcast that Saturday evening. The sixteen million viewers thought that they were watching it live, which was just one of the deceptions practiced. As the Frost theme music swelled at the end, and the credits rolled, I turned to Pilar: “As you see, all guns firing!”

Scarcely were the words out of my mouth when David Frost was back on the screen: He was now live in the studios, it was Saturday evening, but he was wearing the same suit as the night before and he was giving the impression that we were still sitting next to him, and could have interrupted him had we wished.

[Secure the correct text from the transcript to the following].

“Before we finish this evening’s programme,” he said in that sneering voice, “I just wanted to say this.

“Since last night’s programme, we have been inundated with messages from all over the United Kingdom, and I wanted just to mention a few. Sir Laurence Olivier has phoned us to say that at no time was he shown any document, as Mr Irving claimed. Mr Irving’s Polish interpreter, Madame Lubienska, has denied that she is anti-Soviet. Mr William Kimber had also phoned us to say that all the changes that were made were made with Mr Irving’s approval.”

Frost paused with expert timing, and his voice took on a grating edge: “Most of the phone calls that we received last night however said the same thing about Mr Irving. He is just repeating the Nazi propaganda *lie*” – he drawled, managing to get three syllables out of that word – “that was first broadcast by Nazi propaganda minister Dr Joseph Goebbels a few hours after the plane crashed. Good

night." Then his theme music returned.

THIS WAS DIRTY enough, but I did not realise quite how dirty. For a few days I fulminated quietly, then I contacted William Kimber. "I thought that you and I had a private agreement," I began, "that we would not wash dirty linen in public about the circumstances surrounding publication."

"I never contacted Frost in any way," said Kimber in that airy Dennis-Price voice of his. "I was surprised when he made that statement at the end of the programme."

Who was lying here? I contacted Madame Lubienska.

"Am I anti-Soviet?" she exploded. "I was held in a Soviet prison camp for years after the war. Judge for yourself. As for Mr Frost, I never spoke with him."

Olivier confirmed that he, too, had made no attempt to contact the television personality; Frost's secretary had phoned his, but he had declined any comment. David Frost's closing statements were lies from start to finish.

It was now that the inequities, inadequacies, of English law became evident. I contacted my friend Michael Rubinstein, and suggested that Frost should apologise.

"Are you formally instructing me?" asked Michael. I said I was. I was not asking for damages, although the steady erosion being done to my reputation by these devices was palpable. He obtained a verbatim transcript, from which I have reproduced the words above. London Weekend Television was obviously concerned, and made some pretence of offering some relief: they would broadcast a retraction, and Frost himself would withdraw the remarks.

The weeks passed while Rubinstein negotiated with the Television Company's lawyers on the wording of the apologies. He discovered that he had also acted for LWT; he could continue only as an intermediary. The lawyers drew things out, and at the end of three months the television company withdrew its offer, and left it to me to decide whether to sue or not. Rubinstein advised against. Libel verdicts are essentially subjective. Frost would be a popular figure in the eyes of any jury, while I was not. London Weekend

Television did agree to pay the legal costs incurred up to this point. Rubinstein and his capable assistant Maxie Alexander advised me to shut up and move on.

Against their horrified advice, I prepared a one-page pamphlet putting the verbatim transcript beside the statements of all those concerned denying that they had spoken to Frost in any way. I ran it past Rubinstein. He was shocked; it would be a clear libel, he advised, malice was obvious, and I would have no defence.

I was aggrieved, however: downright sore in fact. I was like H. W. Wicks, but unlike him I would keep my grievance under control. I had several thousand copies of the pamphlet printed, and week after week, we methodically sent them out to everybody who we assumed mattered to David Frost and his production company – with copies going to every television and radio critic, every producer, and every senior executive. I do not know what effect this operation, which I codenamed [••], had. One newspaper did dare to pick up the story. The *Daily Express* mentioned it in a William Hickey item; it added that Frost's lawyers had warned them not even to hint at the content of the leaflet. So I knew it had hit home.

Soon after, Frost vanished from British television screens for many years. Perhaps it was just over-exposure, and the British public was tired of him. Whatever the reason, he crossed the Atlantic, to re-invent himself in the United States. Years later, having made his name as an older statesman of television, and acquired some of the manners and decencies that go with statesmanship, he restored himself in the favour of the British viewing public.

The widow of the missing second pilot "Kipper" Herring, now Mrs Joyce R., had never given up hope that he would one day return alive and well. After the two Frost Shows in December 1968, she contacted the R.A.F.'s section AR9 about Herring's fate; they replied on January 16, 1969 confirming that "for official purposes" Squadron Leader Herring was "presumed to have died on July 4, 1943." They had sent her one further letter on the advice of Sir John Slessor, a retired air marshal, on March 7, 1969 about the accident. Unconvinced, in March 1971 she wrote a troubled handwritten letter

to the Ministry of Defence to ask yet again: "Kipp is not [*underlined twice*] still alive, is he? I just don't know what to think. I have been in [*illegible word*] again, & really all this worry does upset me." She added, "Prchal would have told me if Kipp had lived, I am quite sure. I do hear from him from time to time."²² A defence ministry official minuted secretly a few days later: "One of the intriguing features of the incident of course was that the body of Squadron Leader Herring was never found."

The widow continued to press the ministry, and their veterans' affairs office became involved. V A Dawes of OA (R.A.F.) wrote a minute on April 14, 1971, recalling the replies sent to her in January and March 1969. Herring's fate remains a puzzle. Even my father, navy officer, had contacted us from time to time over the years. Would an officer willingly vanish, and never contact his family again? Well, Charles Massey, for whatever reason, did just that.

In Whitehall, London, the wheels of the Establishment had now begun to turn. Early in 1969 I wrote to the Prime Minister Harold Wilson asking that the R.A.F. court of inquiry be reconvened in the light of the evidence I had collected. Queen's Regulations allowed for this, as the government solicitors agreed, and official papers show that for a while it was in the balance.

The establishment counter-attack, the Thompson book, would not be out until the spring of 1969. Late in 1967 there had been a private meeting between Sir John Slessor, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, and a wing commander at the "In and Out," the R.A.F. Club in Piccadilly. The wing commander was Algernon Llewellyn, who had commanded the Liberator Flight of No. 511 Squadron until two months before the fateful crash, and Slessor, then C-in-C of Coastal Command, had signed off on the second Court of Inquiry. Llewellyn had written to the newspapers with his own theory, that loose freight stowed in the plane's nose-wheel area had fouled the control lines (the technical investigators dismissed it). Slessor, forty years older than I, had evidently got a bee in his bonnet about the case.²³

They had evidently reached some agreement, because Llewellyn reminded Slessor two years later of the "long road" they had begun

that day: "It is a good example of how England does work still when sufficiently roused -- thank God!" Meanwhile the Churchill family gathered a powerful legal team, much money, and several aviation experts including Llewellyn, and of course the eccentric author Carlos Thompson.

Prchal had flown into London from California on December 18, 1968 just before the Frost Programme; he had gone immediately to see Llewellyn, who had joined the Carlos Thompson camp. The wing commander wrote soon after: "Prchal came to see me on 18th Dec here, immediately after he landed from California. I had not seen him for 25 years. Up to 1967 he was living a humble happy existence as No. 2 librarian in some small library ... in Los Altos, near San Francisco. His dislike for Irving and his knowledge about the 'revisionists' of history – a thriving American industry – decided him to fight back. He was much encouraged by the trouble decent people are [taking] backing him over the whole affair, and now the whole legal setup which lies behind the Churchill family dropped everything to help him."²⁴

In January 1969 the case was brought up at Cabinet level. On January 27 of that year Sir Burke Trend, the august Secretary to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Cabinet, called a meeting attended by the permanent under-secretary at the air ministry and others. Its outcome and decisions, if any, are not known, but Llewellyn became what he called "a leading debunker of Irving". He drafted a letter for Slessor to send to *The Times*. The newspaper declined to print it, perhaps for legal reasons. In a further letter in government files, Llewellyn wrote to Sir John Slessor on February 2, 1969, keeping him informed: "The legal chat at the moment seems to be that Hochhuth's and Irving's 'masters' will pay anything to settle the different writs out of court, while our judiciary seem to be solid in doing everything possible for the widest possible exposure [*i.e.*, of Hochhuth and myself] in court."

There was more than a whiff about those words of that High Court judge overheard in the Garrick – "There can be no compromising with Irving."

In May 1969: William Kimber, perhaps still hurting from the loss of *The Knight's Move*, approached the government too, as I learned only years later. Engrossed by the Llewellyn theory about a simple accident caused by the baggage in the nose-wheel compartment, he wrote to the publisher of the German-language edition of *Accident*, suggesting they surreptitiously insert it in my book. He approached Sir John Slessor for assistance. Slessor agreed that in the government's view the highest importance should be attached to the baggage hypothesis, *i.e.* anything but sabotage. William Kimber confirmed to him in June that he had written to the German-language publishers, and added: "Should David Irving discover that you are the person with whom I have discussed the matter, and try to get in touch with you [*pencil note: he has not*] may I warn you that anything you might say to him over the telephone will almost certainly be tape recorded at his end." Slessor should restrict himself to written communications with me.²⁵

Having read these letters only in 2002, in which Kimber willingly bent himself to the interests of the higher authorities, I might view the unhelpful evidence he gave in the subsequent PQ.17 action in a different light. Perhaps I am doing him a serious injustice; I did see him after all as a friend at the time.

British files are now gradually coming into the public domain, and they display the mixture of anger and curiosity with which Whitehall followed my investigation into the case.²⁶ Prime Minister Harold Wilson asked curiously whether the British actually had bumped off the Polish general; Sir Burke Trend, the permanent secretary of the Cabinet scribbled, "No."²⁷ Researching the PRO catalogue of the Central Office files of the Foreign Office In the 1980s, I noticed one odd thing: there had in 1943 existed a secret file on the Sikorski crash; it had been split into two, of which one had been withdrawn from the public domain; moreover, the file had evidently been renamed, as the old name had visibly been pasted over in the catalogue and the pages photocopied.²⁸ (The whole page has since then been retyped to conceal the change).

It became clear with the passage of time that my part in the

Sikorski controversy had seriously damaged my fragile standing with the English establishment and media. Calls to my friend Donald McLachlan, the editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, were not returned – or was I just imagining things? Until then my few books had met with universal acclaim, even from the official historians. Now I had the odd sense of standing on an ice floe and I was watching the main ice-shelf receding.

After I protested at one intemperate attack by *The Daily Telegraph*, their managing editor Maurice Green replied with words of oily assurance that he was treating all parties equally in this debate. That same week however *Private Eye* published a fresh item in the *Telegraph*'s internal house-style book: The David Irving involved in the Hochhuth controversy was to be described in future as the “writer”, not the “historian”. My sister, working at the *Telegraph* as a journalist, confirmed it. I flung this morsel back at Green, adding that for all that I cared they might refer to me as a council dustman, but that it did hint at a certain dishonesty in his earlier reply. His written retort was swift and merciless; I have forgotten its content, but it was a very clever and funny put-down indeed, fired at a new writer by somebody with all the practised ease of a veteran wordsmith, and I was after all still learning the ropes.

As things turned out, the whole episode provided the clearest proof that all publicity is not good publicity. Despite three David Frost programmes and overwhelming exposure in the press, *Accident* sold less than a thousand copies. That should have provided food for thought, but I had already moved on to other things.

(Endnotes)

- 1 *The Times*, Oct 22, 1967.
- 2 On Aug 8, 1996, I recalled this in a letter Winston Churchill Jr.: “I think your father suffered from much jealousy of his contemporaries, who no doubt did not like being at the wrong end of his rough tongue. He used it on me once, in a television studio, in 1967, I recall; but that was the fault of that oversmart gentleman David Frost.”

- 3 Diary, Feb 20, 1968.
- 4 According to Massey's daughter Carolyn they moved to nearby Onslow Gardens for a few months, and her father vanished from there in 1968. – Diary, Oct 8, 1996.
- 5 Diary, Aug 17, 1996. It was Mrs Carolyn Beilby.
- 6 On March 26, 1996; "Massey" is not mentioned in my book, but in that of Carlos Thompson, to whom I gave the lead. Ibid.: "6:05-10 PM Discussed this with Benté. She says that when ... she asked *The Sunday Times* for the return of the book two months ago the female Flynn Sarlar (0171 782 7238 [i.e., 020 7782 7238 now]) who borrowed it passed her on to the reporter who was investigating it. He said he was still investigating "something very interesting" about it, and when the time came he would be happy to share it with me." I heard no more.
- 7 Diary: "I said that possibly connected with this is the fact that for six months *The Sunday Times* have had a writer investigating the Sikorski crash, evidently. [They borrowed my only copy of the book accident on March 26.] She said, "I can tell you why!" and then explained that she had found that "a girl" had received all of her father's journals (diaries), and that from having had nothing at the time of her father's death this female was now suddenly apparently awash with funds, had a new car, etc."
- 8 Diary, Aug 17, 1996. On Sep 4, 1996 I tried calling her number, "but a female says it is a wrong number; that's odd – it's the number I called before."
- 9 Pietro Annigoni, Italian Painter, 1910-1988.
- 10 Diary, Oct 8, 1996, quoting my notebook covering that 1968 period.
- 11 Air Chief Marshal Sir William Wratten, GBE, CB, AFC (born 15 August 1939) had been Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of R.A.F. Strike Command since 1994; and previously the senior air force officer in Operation Granby the first Gulf War until the end of that conflict.
- 12 The photos show framed citations. One signed in 1946 by Lord Stansgate, the air minister, formerly William Wedgwood Benn, is in her possession; the other is missing along with one of the medals, evidently a DSO or DSC.
- 13 Diary, Jan 11, 1997.
- 14 Clifford Williams, born December 30 1926; died August 20 2005; he had staged Rolf Hochhuth's *The Representative* (1963) for the RSC at the Aldwych. – Obituary in *The Guardian*, Aug 22, 2005. His daughter attended the Lycée with our own, and we all became good friends.
- 15 CBC *Front Page Challenge* ran for 38-seasons from 1957 to 1995, drawing average audiences of one to two million in the small Canadian market.
- 16 Aleks Sierz of *The Independent* recalled: "Its British opening night was greeted with cheers and Tynan hailed the essential sanity of English audiences."

Clifford Williams said in an interview: "It had a terribly good press, and then out of the blue the libel action started and obliged us to withdraw. It eventually cost us a lot of money." The litigation cost Tynan £20,000.

17 Carlos Thompson (1923–1990), born Juan Carlos Mundin Schafter in Buenos Aires; Thompson was his mother's maiden name. He became a Swiss citizen in 1979 and married Lilli Palmer on September 21, 1957 after she divorced husband Rex Harrison that year. Schafter/Thompson's last film reviewed was March 1967. He shot himself on October 10, 1990 in Buenos Aires.

18 Lilli Palmer (1914–1986), born Lillie Marie Peiser, May 24, 1914, in Posnan, Poland; died of cancer in Los Angeles on January 27, 1986.

19 Thompson had arranged the visit one day previously. "*October 25th, 1981*, London ... 7:10 pm Carlos Thompson (!) telephoned. (He had called this morning around 9 am and left a written note that he must see me.) He said he must see me. I said I have to go to an award ceremony, he insisted on seeing me tomorrow and I agreed at 11 am, although it is inconvenient as I have to collect somebody ... at London airport tomorrow morning. He: 'Are you sure you will be there at 11 am?' I: 'Yes.'

"9:35 pm Rolf [phoned and] said Eschwege police had contacted him to say Carlos Thompson had been pestering his (Rolf's) mother, visited her there, had arranged a meeting with the *Innenminister* of Hessen, was claiming really lunatic things: e.g. that Rolf is 'a paid agent of the SED', (i.e. East German communist party) and that Irving 'has looted art treasures from European museums, has sold these illicitly in New York and stashed the funds in secret Swiss bank accounts.' I said: 'I just hope Thompson repeats this in public and a rich newspaper believes him. Then I won't have any more money worries!' Rolf however is worried – fears that Carlos Thompson is capable of some lunatic act of violence against myself or him, which he will then blame on the SED, or some other organ. I admitted to him that something in Thompson's mad tone alarmed me. Rolf said he would not receive Thompson except in the *Tonhalle* or some other public place in Basel, and urged me to do the same. I said Thompson has already contacted me and has arranged to see me here at 11 am tomorrow. Rolf urged me to break the date. (Anthony Quayle had described Thompson as manic-depressive.)"

20 My dictated diary entry that day: "*October 26th, 1981* (Monday) ... 11:05 am Carlos Thompson arrived as I was seeing off Katie outside. He behaved boorishly, muscled me around, showed me three police type medallions including one he said made him a 'major in the Israeli Secret Service' and generally behaved in such an odd manner over the next minutes before I shook him off that I conclude he should be in a mental hospital, seriously. Later in the evening he met Pilar Sr and the children and got them to talk to him on tape – a most odd behaviour. ... She should not have even begun

talking to him, there is no knowing what this mad assassin is going to do with the tapes he thus acquired.

I had however heard the last of him. “*October 29th, 1981*: ... Rolf Hochhuth telephoned from ... Zurich. I said I had heard no more from Carlos Thompson since that grim day. Rolf said Thompson had now again been barraging his aged mother with calls, and had somehow inveigled Marianne Hochhuth into talking to him at length. ... I feel sorry for Thompson – he should be in a hospital.”

- 21 David Frost was rewarded with an OBE in 1970, and a knighthood in 1993.
- 22 Joyce R. (whose name is known to us) to Min of Defence, Mar 19, 1971; minute by G W Owens to Heskett at the Air Historical Branch, Mar 25, 1971 (PRO file AIR2/15113).
- 23 The papers of Sir John Cotesworth Slessor (1897–1979) are in the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives in King's College London.
- 24 Algernon Llewellyn to Slessor, Feb 2, 1969 (PRO file AIR2/15113).
- 25 Slessor to Kimber, May 26, and reply Jun 24, 1969 (PRO file AIR2/15113). The first I knew of this was in November 2002. The next item, a five-page letter dated May 7, 1970, has been removed from the file, as too secret.
- 26 Ministry of Defence file, re: access [by David Irving] to official records of Sikorski Affair, PRO file DEFE.27/71.
- 27 PRO file **; and see *Churchill's War*, vol. ii: *Triumph in Adversity*, appendix.
- 28 FO.371/34614 was divided into *a* and *b*, of which 34614b, now re-titled simply “Death of General Sikorski,” was withheld.

