

When BBC-reporter John Sweeney came to the IZ to talk about “TrumpRussiaBrexit“, Nichola Hayton, President of the German-British Society in Heidelberg had a chance to interview him beforehand.

*Q Did you always want to become a journalist?*

I wanted to be a defence lawyer. When I was at school in Hampshire, I very often used to go up to Winchester Grand Court. One day, I sat in and followed a rape case. The defence lawyer ripped the victim apart in a way that I found awful and morally obnoxious. My desire to become a defence lawyer was shattered by that ghastly experience. So I no longer knew what I wanted to do, but then I met a journalist from the Southern Evening Echo who wasn't in the least bit pompous. He said: „People always think that journalism is glamorous, but I'm going to go home and watch Miss World on the telly just like everyone else.“ He was funny, but there was also a sense of holding to account. So I decided then I would try to become a reporter. Luckily, I have a gift for writing.

First, I was an intern at The Economist, and after university I worked at the Sheffield Telegraph for four years - which I loved. On a trip to India, I went to the Himalayas to Dharamsala. I met the Dalai Lama and I became the 'Tibet correspondent' for the Sheffield Telegraph (laughs). I was always in trouble at the Sheffield paper. One of the finest moments of my life, however, was when the news editor, who was as tough as nails, said after taking a telephone call: „There's been a murder in Barnsley - where is the f..... Tibet Correspondent?“ Then I knew I was a proper reporter.

*Q What were the hardest, and the most memorable, moments in your career?*

The single most amazing day was Christmas Eve 1989 with the Romanian Revolution. I wrote about it in my book „*The Life and Evil Times of Nicolae Ceausescu*“, which is long out of print now. We were in the West of Romania in Temesvar (Timisoara) and we crossed through the revolution as it was happening. At the shipyard on the river Danube there was a man in a crane who was painting over a sign on an enormous shed with letters as tall as this room saying „Long live Nicolae Ceausescu“. We watched the brush going up and down, wiping it out.

My other two highlights: I have challenged Trump and he walked out on me! And I have challenged Putin too.

The hardest moments were the wars in Yugoslavia, seeing children in hospital in Croatia. My son was five at the time and I met a boy in an hospital in Dubrovnic who had an injured leg. He would be okay, we were told, but he reminded me of my son, and that got to me. Of course the covering of the Bataclan (the terror acts in Paris on November 13<sup>th</sup>) and the terror attacks in Britain.

*Q You went to North Korea undercover in 2013 for a Panorama documentary, and there was already then talk of a nuclear war. Do you think this has become more imminent now?*

Well, the scary person is Donald Trump. North Korea and Iran have watched the fall of Saddam and the fall of Gaddafi and both have bought themselves an expensive insurance policy with their nuclear weapons. In a funny way, them having nukes makes the world a bit safer, but it makes it much more difficult to do anything about these regimes. I don't think it likely we will go to war. The critical players in North Korea are the Chinese, and they have two policies. The official one: We do not like the North Koreans, what they are doing and the fact that they have nukes. And the unofficial one: We do not want South Korea taking over a broken North Korea and then have an American ally on our doorstep. And that is why they put up with North Korea.

One awful possibility is an accident happening with the rockets that the North Koreans launch over Japan into the Pacific. If one of those rockets falls onto Japanese soil and hits an American embassy or American company or a hotel with Americans inside – that would have terrible consequences. With the North Koreans having nuclear weapons, the Japanese might say: „We want them, too!“ So there is potential for a nuclear escalation, or nuclear weapons war around the South China Sea with North Korea playing the role of Serbia in 1914. And that is not good.

*Q Since you have been to North Korea yourself, what was your reaction when you heard about the tragic fate of Otto Warmbier (an American student arrested in North Korea, who died under mysterious circumstances)?*

It was awful. There are around 200 journalists who have been undercover in North Korea. I went in 2013 with the North Korean Friendship Association, a group of Westerners who, crazily, think that North Korea is actually a good place. It was an organized group with guided tours. There was the sense that if we were in trouble they would just kick us out and not imprison us. Otto Warmbier changes that. I would not do now what I did in 2013. I don't know what happened to Otto Warmbier, but I feel awfully sorry for his family. North Korea forbids journalists to enter their country, the problem is that just because a tyrant says so, you should not uphold it. We cannot let a regime like that dictate to us. But it is difficult. I want to understand why people become brainwashed, and obviously Scientology comes into play (Sweeney did a Panorama documentary „Scientology and Me“ in 2007). In a funny way, I say North Korea is like the Church of Scientology, but without Tom Cruise or the nukes.

*Q Another, more recent North Korean story was the death of Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam, who was poisoned at Kuala Lumpur airport. Why did this happen?*

Actually the best book about North Korea was written at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it's called „Macbeth“. Or read Richard III. It is about making sure that there is no possible heir to your throne. Kim Jong Nam was a more human alternative to Kim Jong Un. He was living in China and so he could not be touched. The Chinese make sure that the North Koreans do not muck around in China. Moreover, the insult would have been to great had he been killed on Chinese soil. Once he

was in Malaysia, he was vulnerable. So I say he was a bit of a fool, but nevertheless, it is a dark tragedy.

*Q When you did the documentary about Scientology, how did you protect yourself against the allegations the members of Scientology came up with to discredit you?*

You have to remember I am not on my own. I have a very smart producer called Sarah Mole and a very brave cameraman called Bill Brown. And we knew that if you cover Scientology, they come after you. So it was Sarah's plan that we not only had our big camera, but everywhere we went, even to a restaurant, we had a small camera with us to film as well. They tried to trick us, but we got them back.

*Q Do you live with death threats?*

I don't tend to have so many. I go to Russia; I go to China and I even went to North Korea, but I live in London. So the really brave journalists are the Russian and Chinese journalists who live there and have to live with the consequences, like poor Daphne Caruana Galizia who was killed in Malta. I am in a lucky position.