

Günther: a memoir

Martin Stuart-Fox

I first met Günther in Hong Kong, propping up the end of the bar in the Ship Inn. Paterson greeted him with his usual poise and introduced us. I was just back from four months hitchhiking around Japan. Günther of course had already been there. So we talked about Kyoto, and Japanese culture, and the influence of China. Günther was not just well-informed, he was thoughtful, and he listened. I liked him.

Dick Paterson and I had also met in the Ship Inn. The bar was owned by an expat Australian and was the only watering place in the Tsim Sha Tsui area free of bar girls. We were both teaching: Paterson English at the British Army School, me maths and science over on Hong Kong Island. Occasionally, after a bar crawl around Kowloon I had stayed overnight in Dick's apartment rather than catch a late-night ferry. When I got back from Japan, Dick suggested we share the rent and I moved in.

After a few drinks, Günther suggested dinner, so the three of us piled into his car. This turned out to be a Jaguar XK150, the only one in Hong Kong I should think. Though Günther was used to driving on German autobahns, in Hong Kong I don't think he ever got out of third gear. I certainly never did, the few times I drove it.

Günther was a dedicated gourmet – which I might have guessed from his ample girth – with a discerning palate and an enviable capacity for drink and food, in that order. He took us to a Sichuanese restaurant where he had been once before with a Chinese friend. As the menu was only in Chinese, his friend had written out the dishes to order. They were excellent choices, washed down with cup after little cup of rice wine. Seldom had I enjoyed a meal more. When we came to leave, Günther insisted on paying.

After Günther dropped us off I asked Paterson what his German friend was doing in Hong Kong. The business card he had given me revealed only the name Günther Hofer, the address of his apartment, and a telephone number, with the same in Chinese on the back. Dick was not sure: something to do with the clothing industry he thought. He enjoyed Günther's company because he knew a lot about Chinese food and European history. Oh, and he owned a yacht.

It was a puzzle to me how Dick and Günther had ever become friends. They were so totally different – wiry, brash Scottish nationalist and large, reserved German. The only thing they had in common, apart from an interest in history, was that in Hong Kong, both were outsiders.



Richard George Paterson



Günther Spiesshofer



Günther on his yacht

Paterson was a true eccentric. With a couple of drinks he would proclaim to anyone who would listen that the success of the British Empire had depended entirely on the Scots. The longer he taught at the British Army School, the more nationalistic he became – to the point where he began wearing a kilt around Kowloon, much to the delight of the girls in the Three Sisters Bar downstairs from our apartment.

Once Paterson and I took the ferry to Macau, more for its history than its casinos. But of course we gambled, and I lost all I had with me. Dick did better, and the next time he went off alone, returning proudly with an African Grey parrot that swore in Portuguese. We kept it in the apartment and Paterson took it for walks. At about the same time he learned from the girls in the Three Sisters that brooms brought bad luck, a superstition Dick decided to test. So he bought himself a new broom, perched the parrot on the end, and, kilt swinging, marched into the bar.

I went with him, and low and behold, it worked. The girls abused us, but kept their distance. None asked us to buy them a shot glass of cold tea for an exorbitant price. We ordered a beer, and moved on to the next bar – with similar effect. As the evening wore on and Paterson became more and more inebriated, his kilt-clad figure taking on a pronounced forward tilt. Eventually, with the broom across his shoulder and the parrot perched on the end, he staggered into the Ship Inn. Günther was not impressed. Such frivolity offended his sense of propriety.

Even after I got to know him better, Günther remained cagey about what he was doing in Hong Kong. Eventually he revealed that he was setting up a factory to make ladies' underwear. One morning a couple of months later he took me out to see the place. Long rows of Chinese girls sat at sewing machines, stitching together, one piece at a time, the seventeen bits of fabric or elastic, so Günther informed me, that are required to make one bra. As each piece was added, the garment was passed along to the next girl in line to add the next component, and so on.

The finished bras were then shipped to Lebanon, where, Günther confided, they were rebadged for the European market: a necessary deception, he said, because European consumers still doubted the quality of anything made east of Suez.

I was impressed. It was a large factory, employing at least 200 girls – a veritable production line. I assumed at the time that Günther worked for the company. I had met an American who designed lampshades and was setting up a joint venture with a Chinese partner to manufacture for export to the US. When Günther introduced me to his Chinese floor manager – the gentleman who had been kind enough to write out our Sichuan restaurant order – I assumed they had a similar sort of arrangement. I never imagined that Günther actually owned the parent company in Germany. Nor did I know that his name was not Hofer.

Günther's yacht was moored at the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, of which he was a member. It had a Chinese captain, a crew of four, and comfortable accommodation for Günther and guests. Günther sometimes entertained business acquaintances on board, but he was a keen sailor and he had bought it for pleasure. Every two of three weeks, Günther, Paterson and I piled into the Jag, shopped for more food than we could possibly eat (“the rest will be for the crew”), filled cold boxes with drinks, and boarded the yacht at a jetty around from the Kowloon ferry terminal.

We would leave on a Saturday afternoon, sail to some secluded bay where we could swim, and lounge in deckchairs as the sun set and the crew prepared the food. We slept on board, and woke to mornings crisp and clear, sometimes lowering the dinghy to join fisher folk at wharf-side markets selling varieties of shellfish that we sampled sitting on low stools.

We formed an odd trio: Günther large in every way, diminutive Paterson with his habitual pipe, and my tall, thin self. Occasionally Günther would disappear for a couple of weeks ‘on business’. And then he would be back at the bar. He never told us where he had been or what he had been doing, and I was never interested enough to ask.

As time passed Paterson drank more and became more argumentative. One evening at the Ship Inn he got into a loud argument with a couple of drunken British soldiers. Dick was wearing his kilt, and making the case that only the Scots knew how to fight. At which point he was invited to step outside, and did. I followed, trying to calm both sides. As insults were exchanged, I tried to separate the badly matched contestants – wee Paterson and a solidly built but very drunk British soldier, who claimed to be the regimental boxing champion. When a punch was thrown, it missed Paterson and hit me in the mouth, snapping off a front tooth. Furious, I threatened to bring a charge of assault, and the soldiers took flight. Günther, still sitting quietly at the bar, was sympathetic.

At the conclusion of the school year, I decided to travel on. Hong Kong had just been a stopover: the goal was to get to England, the destination of every young Australian with a taste for travel. So I booked a passage to Saigon, with the intention of continuing on overland. Dick and Günther waved me off from the wharf. We all agreed to keep in touch. Günther was going to Thailand in

a month or so, but I spent more time in Vietnam and Cambodia than I had planned, and when I got to Bangkok a letter left at Poste Restante told me that Günther had come and gone.

I did eventually get to England, but not before spending three years in Indochina and another in India. In 1967 I happened to be in Munich, so looked up an address Günther had given me. This turned out not to be his apartment, but the headquarters of Triumph International, which I assumed must be the company Günther worked for. When I asked for Günther Hofer, I was shown into the office of a lady who informed me she was the personal secretary of Mr Günther Spiesshofer, if that was who I was looking for. I told her about Hong Kong and the yacht and being friends, and she nodded: "That is Mr Spiesshofer."

Only then did I realise that Hofer was a cover-name, and that Günther was actually CEO of one of the largest lingerie companies in the world. Triumph International had been founded by Günther's grandfather and passed on to his son and son-in-law, and the two families still owned it. The Spiesshofers and the Brauns. Well that explained the yacht!

And then a surprise: did I know Mr Paterson? Yes, but how did she? It was then that I learned that when Dick had resigned from teaching, Günther had brought him to Germany, where he had invented a job with Triumph with some title to do with 'market liaison'. That didn't last long. Not only was Dick drinking heavily, he was also becoming erratic in his habits and mentally unstable. In the end he suffered a complete breakdown and Günther arranged for him to return to the UK, where she thought he had been committed to psychiatric care. She didn't know where. Günther meanwhile was in Australia, cruising the Great Barrier Reef.

I never did discover what happened to Dick Paterson. And as Günther and I clearly lived in different worlds, he too dropped out of my life.

Three decades on, when I was teaching at the University of Queensland, a letter arrived from the manager of Triumph Australia saying that Mr Günther Spiesshofer would like to know if I was the same Martin Stuart-Fox he once knew in Hong Kong. I admitted as much, and a week later, Günther phoned. He was in Brisbane; we chatted, and he suggested dinner.

I asked him how he had found me. He said he knew that I had gone from teaching to journalism, but had lost track of me thereafter. Then he had come across an article in a newspaper in Singapore that mentioned my UQ affiliation. And for old times' sake, and out of curiosity, he decided to look me up.

At dinner my wife and I met Günther's partner. Susan was Taiwanese. She had been running a small retail outlet for lingerie when Günther met and courted her, and convinced her to come and live in Hong Kong, then Triumph's headquarters for Asia. What complicated their relationship was that Günther had married young, and though separated, was not divorced. This was for two reasons: because both were Catholic and their families disapproved of divorce, but more importantly, because Triumph was a family-owned company and a divorce settlement would have had financial consequence at a time when Triumph was undertaking an ambitious

expansion on two fronts – within Europe, and beyond. So under the terms of the separation, Günther's wife would live in luxury for the rest of her life, but never file for divorce. And nor would Günther.

What this meant, however, was that Günther could never marry Susan – and Susan knew that. All was well at first. Günther had taken charge of Triumph's international expansion beyond Europe, leaving the Braun family to look after the company's European operations. Günther and Susan travelled widely, throughout Asia and North and South America – always first class, always five star – as Günther negotiated with governments and banks to set up new Triumph assembly lines and distribution networks in over thirty countries. Everywhere Susan was accorded the respect given to extreme wealth, even by those who suspected she was Günther's mistress.

This was tolerable for Susan as long as Günther lived and worked in Asia. It was when she accompanied him to Europe – Triumph was incorporated in Switzerland – that she was made aware that as far as the Spiesshofers and Brauns were concerned, she enjoyed no social standing. And she hated it. So when Günther went back to Europe on business, Susan visited her family in Taiwan, where Günther had bought her a penthouse apartment.

All this was confided not to me, but to Elisabeth. My wife is French, Parisienne, but for Susan it was her Asian heritage that counted. For Susan, Elisabeth was someone who would not just sympathise, but share her feelings of hurt and outrage. We were staying a few days with Günther and Susan at a rural property Günther had bought near Esk, about two hour's drive northwest of Brisbane. Günther had installed a manager in the station homestead up the valley, and built himself a new house half a kilometre along the creek, which he had christened Glen Fiddich, after his preferred single malt.

He had bought the property because as well as his shorthorn steers there were wild deer to shoot. He visited perhaps twice a year, for not much more than a week at a time. The manager was informed in advance, and a carcass of venison would be hanging in the cold room ready for butchering. Susan hated the Australian bush, its sameness, its brooding silence, its dangerous reptiles, and because there was nobody else around. She only felt at ease in a crowd.

But Günther loved Australia. What had drawn him in the first place were sailing and big game fishing. He had, of course, bought another yacht, which he sailed whenever he could, north up along the Great Barrier Reef as far as Lizard Island, where he would go marlin fishing. It was the reason he chose Brisbane as the location for Triumph's Australian headquarters. In fact he spent so much time in Australia that he bought a house in Hamilton with a fine view up the Brisbane River, to add to the three or four he owned elsewhere.

Each time we stayed with him at Glen Fiddich, Günther would drive us around the property in the station Landover, up impossibly steep tracks and along ridgelines, scanning the hills for deer with powerful binoculars. Günther was an excellent, if fastidious, cook and loved to spend time in the kitchen with Elisabeth. Susan disliked cooking, and thought it was something servants should do. I was happy to browse his extensive library of Australiana and wait to be served. We pottered in the garden, walked along the creek, and all got along pretty well.

Günther was by then the Senior Partner in Triumph and Chairman of the company, with responsibility for world-wide production and sales. A major focus for some time had been China, where Günther was determined to establish Triumph as the principal brand at the luxury end of what was a growing market for lingerie. In 2001, he invested over a million dollars to mount fashion parades in 30 cities over three and a half months. The Chinese had never seen anything like it: 26 of the country's loveliest models showed off Triumph's laciest bras and panties to the evident pleasure of invitees.

Developing the China market meant, however, that Günther came to Brisbane less often and for shorter periods, leaving not enough time to go out to Glen Fiddich, let alone sailing. We kept in contact, however, and had dinner any time he was in town. Günther rated Australian cuisine highly, especially the quality of the seafood. The only disaster was when we took him to our favourite French restaurant on what turned out to be the chef's night off.

As Günther was by then hardly using his house in Hamilton, he put it on the market. Before it sold, however, he decided to hold one last dinner party to celebrate his 65th birthday. We were about twenty people – Günther's former yachting and fishing friends (he had long since sold his yacht), a couple of neighbours, his Triumph manager, even his real estate agent, along with partners.

It was a dinner like no other: we began with drinks at 7 pm and continued on to caviar at around 2 am. Each course was served in a different room by an army of caterers. We began with oysters and sashimi. Günther was very partial to Japanese food, having made a study of it over the two years it took him to establish Triumph production and distribution in Japan. The secret, he insisted, lay in the freshness of the ingredients.

In the first room, two long tables ran parallel with a space between them in which sat three oyster shuckers opening the three kinds of oysters flown in that day from Sydney, Hobart and Adelaide. At one end, a shorter cross-table formed a 'T', where Günther and Susan sat with a yachting friend and his wife to their left and Elisabeth and I to their right. In front of us the Japanese sashimi chef prepared his fresh slices. Günther had bought him out of a major hotel, sent him down to Port Lincoln to choose the finest and freshest Southern Bluefin Tuna, and fly back with it that day.

The accompanying wine was superb, the conversation animated. Günther was in his element. Eventually he rose and led us into the next room, where another set of tables was laid in readiness for the second course of baked Barramundi. And so on to another room for poultry (duck and quail), and back to the previous one for a choice of meat dishes – all accompanied by appropriate wines. Between each course palate cleansers were served.

And so on to yet another room for a selection of cheeses, followed by desserts and presents. What does one give the super-rich? I presented inscribed copies of two of my books on Laos and Cambodia, which Günther assured me he would read – and probably did. At two in the morning we finished up with Beluga caviar – why I am not sure, but Elisabeth enjoyed it. We were all

exhausted. Günther cheerfully waved us off. He had greatly enjoyed himself. Susan had gone to bed.

In the years that followed we kept in touch through Günther's personal secretary in Germany and letters at Christmas. Every three or four years Elisabeth and I tried to get to Europe to see family. Each time Günther arranged for us to meet up. He had tickets for Aida to be performed in the Roman amphitheatre in Verona. Could we join him? Quick change of plans and train tickets from Florence. Fabulous performance, choreographed against the stone steps. Dinner and hotel at Günther's expense. His generosity was impossible to argue with.

Another time we flew to Munich where we had met Günther before and explored the city. This time his personal chauffeur met us at the airport, with instructions to drive us down to Schloss Lindhof and on to Neuschwanstein Castle, both built by the eccentric Ludwig II of Bavaria. Günther was on his summer holiday. He met us at the hotel and whisked me off to a large nearby lake where he happened to own the fishing rights. We threaded our way along planking between moored houseboats to meet one of Günther's tenants who caught and smoked eels from the lake. And there we ate supper of smoked eel and crusty bread, Günther with his shirt open in the summer heat licking eel oil from his fingers and beaming with pleasure.

When Elisabeth and I went to China to do some research, Günther insisted we fit in a side trip from Hong Kong to Taipei, where he was staying a couple of weeks for Susan to see her family. We were met at the airport by a Triumph driver and taken to a hotel. Lunch each day was at a different restaurant and in the evenings we snacked in Susan's apartment. Günther collected Asian art, and the place was like a museum. But Susan was in her element, haughtily directing her two servants.

One evening Günther took us to a Triumph reception and introduced us to his nephews. Günther was stepping down from day-to-day direction of the company in his capacity of Chairman, to make way for the next generation, and his nephews were in Taiwan to take stock of the company's Asian operations. Apparently they were concerned about Günther's plans for further expansion, and wanted to consolidate what was already in place. This was the first inkling I had of dissension within the family. Günther felt that his decades of knowledge about doing business in Asia were being dismissed.

The last time we saw Günther and Susan was in the summer of 2012. Günther had retired and held no official position in Triumph International. He still had his loyal personal secretary who kept him informed of company business, but less and less did he attend board meetings – or family gatherings, for that matter. He was clearly hurt that no one any longer took notice of what he thought about the future direction of the company to which he had devoted his life. His nephews listened politely, smiled, and took no notice of fat old Uncle Günther.

It had been five years since Elisabeth and I were in Europe, and they had not been kind to Günther. Each time we had seen him he had put on weight: now he was obese and had difficulty moving around. He had sold his houses in Sicily and somewhere in the Caribbean, and his apartment in Hong Kong, and bought a retirement home in Ascona in Switzerland.

Of course he invited us to stay. I said we'd love to come for a couple of days. He insisted on longer. I know other friends visited him in Ascona, and I think he was lonely. Susan was with him, but Günther was gregarious by nature, and loved to play the host.

The house had been beautifully renovated. The garden terrace provided a view back over the town and out across the Swiss end of the Lago Maggiore. In a semicircle around the edge of the terrace were arranged several life-size statues – Chinese, Indian, Khmer. Günther had flown his agent over from New York, told him what he wanted, and made his choice. They had cost him US\$6 million. Smaller exquisite pieces of Asian art that Günther had collected over the decades were displayed in a floor-to-ceiling glass cabinet across one wall of the living room and in alcoves set into the winding stairwell. What it was all worth I couldn't imagine.

It soon became clear that Susan hated the house, despite having servants to order around, and hated living in Europe. She missed Asia, even though she flew back to Taiwan at least twice a year. She had clung to the hope that Günther's wife would drink herself to death, and that she and Günther could at last marry, so giving her the status she had so long craved. But there was no sign of that happening, and Susan felt acutely the disdain of Günther's family for his Chinese mistress. She was bitter and unhappy, ashamed of Günther's obesity when on one occasion we went down to a restaurant on the waterfront and he was hardly able to walk from the car.

While Susan unburdened herself to Elisabeth, Günther complained to me. The next generation was running the company. He was redundant. Susan was unhappy and wanted to return to Taiwan. He would stay in Ascona. Though they had been together for more than thirty years, she would not return. We sat up late, drinking. When I appeared next morning he was up before me, with a bottle of red already open, staring at the television.

It was an awkward stay. Susan belittled Günther in front of us, telling him he was a stupid old man; Günther smiled and refused to answer back. Elisabeth was shocked and acutely uncomfortable. We escaped for a day of sailing down the lake. All that wealth: all that sadness. We said goodbye with a sense of relief and foreboding, knowing it was adieu. Günther was drinking himself to death. When Susan finally left, he stayed on into autumn before moving to his estate in Heubach for the winter.

Six months later I got a call from Günther's personal secretary to inform me that Günther was dead. He had fallen one evening, couldn't get up, and spent the night in agony. The housekeeper had found him the next morning. He was rushed to hospital, but never recovered. I sent a card to his nephews conveying my condolences. I told them their uncle was a man of honour and integrity, and of great generosity; that he was a complex and thoughtful man; that I would miss him. Elisabeth also wrote to Susan in Taiwan. From neither did we receive a reply.

RIP Günther Spiesshofer (3 May 1936 - 22 Feb 2013)