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THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

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BY MARIANNE MACDONALD

David Irving is Britain's most controversial historian. His books on Hitler have got him banned from Germany and Jewish critics have called him the 'highest profile neo-Nazi'. Even his girlfriend boycotted his latest book launch

DAVID IRVING'S sprawling Bond Street flat is a kind of lair, with a study at its centre with Nazi newspapers on the wall. Here, Irving keeps himself relentlessly busy issuing writs for libel, firing off letters to supporters and detractors, and, of course, writing his idiosyncratic books on Hitler and his henchmen.

The mansion flat is also the home of his Danish girlfriend of five years, Bente, who is 33, and their daughter, Jessica, who is three. Both are blonde, blue-eyed and beautiful, although Jessica has the uninhibited directness of a child, and Bente does not. When I was with Irving - I visited twice - she was almost completely silent. She smiled at me hesitantly and removed herself to the bedroom.

Bente told me later that she did not agree with her 59-year-old boyfriend about a great many things, and the couple appear to exist in a state of perpetual, if low-level, warfare. For example Irving wanted her to pose in our picture, and indeed leaned on her to do so, but she refused. There was a bit of a scene about it. When Jessica reported that her teddy did not want to be in the picture either, Irving observed with a cold glance: "Teddy is a parasite, and Teddy doesn't pay for the school fees."

Bente especially disagrees with Irving's views on Hitler. For the man in her life has been described by Jewish opponents as "the world's highest profile neo-Nazi" for arguing that there is no proof that the Führer ordered the mass murder of the Jews. Irving also has grave doubts that 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust or that many were gassed at Auschwitz - views which have necessarily lost him many friends, earned him worldwide loathing, and irreparably damaged his early, stary reputation. So just as Bente absented herself when I was present at the flat, she boycotted the party Irving held last month to launch his new book about the Nazis, *Nuremberg: The Last Battle*.

Irving, who publishes through his own imprint Focal Point, is still finding things missing from his flat after that "whoop-de-do to thank people who have helped me and fund my fight against the enemies of free speech". His guests included shaven-headed men in black suits, and some members of the British National Party, according to a *Spectator* journalist who joined the lager-drinking throng. Presumably it was one of these who pinched Irving's toy figurine of Hitler, made in Nazi days, which he was rather fond of. However, they did not find his Hitler self-portrait - which he had the foresight to lock away - nor Jessica's favourite article of cutlery, the "birdie spoon" as she calls it, which belonged to Hitler and bears the eagle of the Reich on its handle.

THE FIRST time I visited Jessica was there and feeling bored and grumpy because she had

been kept off nursery with a cold. While Bente entertained her in the further reaches of the flat, Irving led me into the kitchen and chatted with good-humoured gusto for an hour. He adores an audience, and particularly enjoys entering into friendly combat with them, pitting his intellect against theirs and lobbing little grenades from time to time to keep things lively.

One of these was on the subject of women. Irving told me with some relish that women's brains are smaller than men's, and that the missing 10 per cent accounts for their inability to be punctual or tidy - "to hang a towel straight on a towel rail, this kind of thing." Irving also thinks, or says he thinks, that women are innately devious. His evidence for this is primarily that girlfriends have secretly read his diary, while a man "would never, ever read anyone else's diary".

It turned out, however, that such feminine snooping might prove fruitful in his case because whenever he slept with a woman he recorded it in a code based on the word "amiable". He enlarged on this with his head resting trustingly on his forearms on the back of his chair. "I might say, oh I don't know, Caroline came round and was amiable". And no one would guess. But then I might get careless and say: "Caroline came round

again and was amiable twice." And that is something of a giveaway.

Did Bente read his diary? "Oh yes. She won't admit it, but she does... Never underestimate the deviousness of women."

This was the first of many little digs at Bente, so I understood why she later agreed to talk to me on my own. "I think I should," she said, looking coldly at Irving, "to make my corrections."

Irving was unbothered by this and confided, perhaps contemptuously, that she wanted to "protect her image". As open about her as every other aspect of his life, he said Bente was mad about shopping, slow to appreciate nature, checked his phone log to see if he had rung his girlfriends, suspicious of me - "How can you trust her?" - and had thought I was 18 years old (flattering, but not the case).

His observations about women seemed, in fact, to be part of their tacit war. Men were decent, honourable and true, he said, while women could not write symphonies or read a clock. "I was on time today," I pointed out. "Yes, but that probably took an hour or so of preparation, and then hanging round downstairs by a parking meter for 25 minutes." I protested I had not, and he said: "That is because you have read

the articles and know my views, and you are determined to prove me wrong."

I stood up at this point and he actually flinched; I think he thought I was going to throw my coffee at him. But I was far too amused. "Do you believe all this rubbish?" I asked, and he roared with laughter and possibly relief. "Ahl! That's the question! Well, it's become dangerous now to, to, to 'fess up one way or the other on that, because I am surrounded by women: I have five daughters, and there's no doubt the female is more vicious than the male. During the demonstrations against me it was the women who carried the signs saying 'Gas Irving'."

"But the Nazis as men gassed millions," I said. "Well, my answer to that is, of course, the abortion movement. Totally innocent human beings being killed."

Jessica halted our wrangling by wandering in with several toys that she wanted her daddy to play with. Irving was unmoved. "Not now, Jessica," he said. So she reached herself up to a cupboard, got out what she needed, and trailed out again.

IRVING was so open that I now know more about his life than I do about many of my friends. I know he dislikes women to have flat chests or blue underwear, both of which he deems unsexy. I know he bought his flat 14 years ago for £100,000, and fears he cannot afford to keep it much longer. I know his schizophrenic eldest daughter, who is 33, had an accident last year in which her legs were crushed so badly that one of them had to be amputated. I know his twin brother changed his name by deed poll, which Irving says was to avoid the stigma of his views, and I know that Irving plans to marry Bente when he has the time, and that they will name their next child Rebecca.

His right-wing supporters know much of this, too, for Irving sends them a diary of his doings written, in an unconvincing pretence at objectivity, in the third person. He has a passion for categorising his life. His supporters, who have given Irving £25,000 this year and include a Knight of the Ku Klux Klan (I know because he showed me his records) can thus follow the increasingly wretched progress of his life. The events he describes consist largely of the humiliations he has earned by his insistence on publishing his often obnoxious views.

These include being attacked in an upmarket café where he used to eat Sunday lunch, and being told never to return; being picketed by what he calls "Blacks, Jews, homosexuals, lesbians and underworld characters" at his flat; being struck off his dentist's list; being the object of vitriolic attacks in the press; having his American publisher

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Demonstrators picket Irving's Mayfair flat (above); Irving sitting in front of a portrait of his first wife (right)

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PORTRAIT BY DAVID GAMBLE

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cancel his Goebbels biography (which he took eight years to write) last year after *Publishers Weekly* in the US called it "repellent", being banned from the German state archives and being expelled from Austria, Italy, Canada and Germany. He is now forbidden entry to all these, and the Commonwealth countries, too.

Irving maintained a triumphant demeanour when telling me about these setbacks and repeatedly described them as "interesting". But I was reminded of a comment about Irving by Gitta Sereny, the historian whom Irving is suing for libel: "There is, I think, despair in all this." Wasn't it self-destructive to keep making trouble? He did not like this question and made several attempts to change the subject before admitting in a strained voice: "I look in the mirror and I know I'm disliked. And I know what I can do to be liked. Stop ploughing a straight furrow." Why didn't he? "Pride. It is not consistent with my pride."

He had a death wish, I suggested. "It isn't. It isn't. It's very interesting... Year after year, publisher after publisher has come under pressure not to publish my books. In the last 12 months I have seen not only every publisher worldwide come under pressure, but also every literary agent around the world who has ever acted for me and every printer who has printed those books. It's a very interesting situation. You might find the word 'interesting' wrong, you might find it nightmarish. But from where I am standing in the eye of the storm, seeing it come at me from every corner of the globe, from every angle of the horizon, from every point of the compass, it's fascinating to see it happening. I'm on the bridge."

At this point Bente came in and said: "I'm taking Jessica back to the nursery." Jessica came to the table where we were sitting and held her fist up in a salute. Irving peeked at me. "We don't do the Communist salute, Jessica," he told her. Her fist stayed in the air. Irving looked at her fondly. "We're proud of Jessica. Aren't we Jessica. We're very proud of Jessica." Jessica ran to her mother and retorted: "We're very proud of Mummy!"

IRVING SAYS he wants to "chip off a bit of the gloss" which surrounds the Holocaust, which he thinks is a legend sustained by powerful vested interests. "What is the Holocaust?" he asked during my first visit. "They use this word but you're not allowed to define it. If someone is taken to Auschwitz and dies there from another cause than being murdered - you note I'm not saying the gas chambers - such as exhaustion, starvation, illness, old age, do they belong in the statistics or don't they?"

"I would say the whole of World War Two is a holocaust, then you can't come up against those problems of definition. I accept there were killings, but not on the scale that's now claimed. In the reading of the SS colonel Adolf Eichmann's papers I'm prepared to accept gasings on a very limited scale. Eichmann's papers described watching gas truck experiments."

What about the gasings at Auschwitz? It was like a murder case without the weapon or the body, he replied. "We have 48 extremely clear aerophotographs of Auschwitz, taken by the Americans during the war, and they show no trace of mass graves. That is the first problem when dealing with questions of scale, and it's a question of scale we're talking about. I think 100,000 people died at Auschwitz."

"I have three or four reasons for thinking that figure. The reasons are quite simple. (One) the capacity of the crematoria furnaces. We know how many cadavers they could have cremated over the period. (Two) we know how much coke the cremation process would have taken. And we know 2,188 tonnes of coke were delivered to Auschwitz - enough to cremate about 60,000 cadavers. (Three) the Russians released the death books of Auschwitz to the German government nine years ago which would tell the names of people who died at Auschwitz. There were 70,000 names. I'm not saying they were the same 70,000 names. But it is a curious fact. If the one million they now say were killed at Auschwitz had been burned, and not cremated, we know the size of the pit this would have taken: 10 bodies to one cubic metre. You can work it out with simple mathematics [he explains how he has



Man least wanted: in 1992 Irving was expelled from Canada. He is also banned from Germany, Italy and Austria

done so at some length]... you would have needed 100,000 cubic metres of pit."

I asked how he squared this offensive theory, which contradicts numerous studies of the Holocaust, with Primo Levi's account of life (and the gas-chamber selections which led to death) in Auschwitz. "That novel," he said dismissively. It's not a novel, I said. "Committed suicide, didn't he?" Irving said. "Mentally unstable." Had he read the book? He hadn't. "But Levi is an example of what I'm saying. He survived Auschwitz."

Was he anti-Semitic? Irving grinned wolfishly. "I'm not - yet... So where did his views come from? It is probably a perversion," he speculated. "A sense of being against the stream." Why did he have that? A psychologist would have to answer that. But sometimes I find myself asking what I would have done in Nazi Germany. If I'd been of age I'd probably have been in the Resistance.

I thought this highly unlikely, but remarked only that it could not be very pleasant to be so contrary. "Occasionally it can have unexpected results. You look around and see a lot of people are following you. It's a pleasant feeling."

Did he accept, surely he must accept, that what was done to the Jews was wrong? He wasealed around a bit, then said: "It's rather impertinent for me as an Englishman to start dictating to, to, to the German people. I have not seen my livelihood destroyed by the German merchant banks between the two World Wars. I've not seen my entire family fortune wiped out by the merchant bankers. I've not seen - I've not seen a number of things which the Nazis used to justify the steps they took against the Jews in the Thirties."

But would he admit that what Hitler did to the Jews was wrong? "I'm not going to give you an easy answer here and say it was wrong. From a German nationalist point of view they thought themselves entitled to do this and he got the backing of the entire German people..."

Had it ever occurred to Irving that he had lost profession, status and reputation defending Hitler - which were the first things that Hitler had taken from the Jews? No, he said, it hadn't.

There arose a sudden arpeggio of wailing and Jessica came flying into her father's arms. "She needs a rest," said Bente from behind her. "No! No!" cried Jessica. She subsided, rocked in her father's arms. Irving's face softened, and I was admiring the tableau until he said quietly to the sleepy child: "Who do you prefer? Mummy? Or daddy?" Then he remembered my presence: "Of course," he corrected himself awkwardly, "it's a difficult question for you to answer."

THE FLAT had the hush of a museum on my second visit. In the hall a doll lay frozen in a foetal crouch. Its owner was at nursery school and Bente was nowhere to be seen. Irving was very pleased to see me, however, and led me straight

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to the kitchen, where he clumsily dished up coffee. This time our conversation was interrupted by both Jessica and the phone, at which Irving talked cryptically into the receiver: "I would be glad to give you a reference... Well, a lot of my friends are in prison now in Germany..."

I wanted to find out why Irving turned out as he has, and his childhood offers the amateur psychologist plenty of clues. His father John, for example, was a naval commander who served in both World Wars, leaving for the Second when Irving was a small boy. He adored his father, who never came back. Not because he was killed, but because he didn't want to stay with Irving's mother. So Irving was brought up with no father figure and little money. He is quite angry about the deprivation he suffered.

Irving also has a twin brother, not identical. I will save his blushes by not naming him, but suffice it to say that he is, according to Irving, a very respectable civil servant who is "endlessly boring and balding". He says (which is hard to believe) that he had little to do with one another when growing up. One could speculate that Irving deliberately reacted against him, but perhaps that is too obvious. Both went to a public school in Brentwood, Essex. Irving claims he got 17 O-levels and 11 A-levels, but failed history O-level.

He read physics at Imperial College in London but did not finish his degree because he ran out of money. He then spent a year as a steelworker in the Ruhr in Germany, which is where he got the idea for his first book, about the Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945. This he wrote in a hut on the

building site that became the Commonwealth Institute: he had been hired as night watchman.

Irving married his first wife, a Spanish woman named Pilar, in 1961 and they had four daughters before they divorced in 1981. Josephine, who had the accident, lives in a flat in Covent Garden. Her sisters are Maria Pilar, an artist, Paloma, who does not work and retains the name of her divorced husband; and Beatrice, a graphic designer who hopes to emigrate to Australia.

Irving met Bente in 1992 when he rented out his flat during a trip to South Africa and came back to find her sleeping, "like Goldilocks", in his bed. Romance blossomed. Probably Irving could not believe his luck at landing a beautiful girl the age of his eldest daughter.

But, he told me over a lunch laced with anecdotes about former girlfriends, he did not spoil her. She was, he conceded, a very good mother, but he set the parameters for Jessica's upbringing. He planned to marry her but explained casually that he "hadn't got around to it".

Irving had a rare glass of beer with his veal and this may have encouraged him to direct his voracious interest in women toward me. He told me my husband was very lucky and added naughtily that he was a gentleman, "which is why I'm not having any wicked thoughts about you". Later, he complimented me on my "black stockings", an article of clothing he particularly liked, and was generally in a very good mood when we parted.

THE NEXT DAY Bente rang me and suggested that we meet in an expensive coffee shop in North Audley Street. She was the opposite of her boyfriend; poised tensely on her chair, not volunteering information, extremely beautiful - fashionably dressed, very slim, clear blue eyes.

She agreed to meet me, she said without emotion, because "I wanted to put my point of view across, and because I know his relationship with the truth." So I checked a few things. Did she intend to have another baby (called Rebecca)? "Definitely not, no." Did she read Irving's diary? "David leaves his diary open on the computer screen. It's staring me in the head. He wants me to read it. Sometimes he writes really rude things about me." Did she love shopping? "Yes." Had she thought I was 18? "I said you were 23, 24! How could you be doing interviews at 18?"

She reported that Irving had been "livid" that she refused to be in our photograph, but was in a very good mood the night before, because "he had had an attentive listener for five hours". She suggested with a giggle I might like to come every day. She got very bored of all his talk, she added, "and I certainly don't agree with him about the Holocaust."

What was he like? "It's as if he has about 10 different personalities. You never really know who you're going to meet the next day. There's the evil side and the charming side." Evil was a strong word to use, I said. "Yes," she agreed. In a characteristic gesture, she lifted her eyebrows up and down and pursed her lips.

She confirmed Irving's story of how they met. "I couldn't believe my luck. He was so interesting and intelligent. Then, when I got to know him better, I thought there were two sides to the coin."

She spent her time looking after Jessica, she said. She did not think Irving would allow her to redecorate the rather shabby flat. "I don't think he would appreciate that. He talks about my table, my sofa." She raised her eyebrows.

She had come to England 15 years ago as an au pair and doubted she would ever go back to Denmark. Her parents had been disappointed that she had not taken up her university place. Her father, a retired dentist, was angry that she was with Irving. Neither parent had met him, or intended to. "But they're all right about Jessica."

Why did he go out of his way to cause trouble for himself - and pain to other people? "He gets a kick out of stirring things up, for some reason, I don't know why. In fact, I'm not sure he agrees with what he says. He's not like me. I like things smooth, I like to get on with people."

Did she ever talk to him about his activities - try to change them? "Oh yes. But I've given up. I said he could use his talents for good causes. But he said that would be boring."

He said that would be boring? "Yes." She giggled at the absurdity of it. "He said that would be too boring." □