

## Interview with Paula Shaw

ST: This is Sheila Triggs on the 3rd December 2014 interviewing Paula Shaw, particularly about the memories of her Great Aunt.

PS: Hello I am Paula Shaw and I am here to talk about my Great Aunt Mercha.

ST: So you want to tell as a little bit about who she was and when she was?

PS Yes. My Great Aunt Mercha was born as Miriam Karpowic in Russia in 1896 and after the Russian Revolution she came to England. She was then a trained biology teacher, and she came and married Alex Kay who was the first Labour Councillor\* in Liverpool, and she had been, she was involved with WILPF at least from the 1950s but it may have been before, but I don't have any recollection because I was only born in 1953.

ST: Good good. So do you want to say something about what might have influenced her and how she got going and any background?

PS: Yes. She was a very stern lady but very kind as well, and her family, her parents, sort of died when she came to England, but her sisters and brothers were all killed during the Holocaust and I would guess that would have been when she actually got very involved with WILPF.

My father came to this country to live with her in 1938 and he never went back. His parents were killed in 1943 at Majdanek. She was certainly involved with the peace movement then because I remember as a child, sort of, these mainly ladies, coming round and having meetings and the other thing I have from the early days is a recipe book which... 'contributions from WILPF members of the Liverpool Branch' with all their recipes. I have got a very dog-eared copy of that recipe book.

ST: That is interesting that they considered that that was a good thing to produce at that time, and you have used this recipe book?

PS: I have there was a lovely apple sponge cake which she used to make and I have done that and my children love it too, even though they are grown up. I still have not conquered chopped liver, but I am not a practicing Jew. Its all right. I forgot to say she was Jewish, so obviously.

ST: Right. So you want to talk about your experiences when you were growing up of the sorts of things you observed her doing and as you got older what you understood of that.

PS: Yes. When I was ten I was aware that she did go away and I did not know at the time but I have a copy of her notebooks from that year. And she actually went to the World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1963, and I remember her talking to my Father about Kruschev and listening to him

speaking and how he wasn't ... well I won't say what her views on him were because I can't remember exactly. But quite often they used to talk in Yiddish if they didn't want me to understand what was being said. But she did go to Russia to the World Peace Congress so really I've got...

ST: She was a delegate then?

PS: She was a delegate. She wrote a report for the WILPF *Peace and Freedom News*. which I still have her original copy of that and I still have her original notes in a notebook which she used to make the report to WILPF. It sounds like the Liverpool Branch was quite active in those days in the '60s. She kept involved with it and as I got older I didn't go and stay as much. As a child I used to go every summer. My father always went to chemical conferences and I was dumped there - happily. But as I got older I didn't, but I do know that she kept getting the WILPF newsletters right up to 1978. So she had obviously stayed as a member. Then she died in 1979. But she did teach me a lot about being non-judgemental and listening to all sides, as did my Father, and I think that came from her involvement with WILPF and her natural way of being.

ST: And how old was she in 1979 when she died?

PS: Oh, My maths is bad. She was in an old people's home in Didsbury Manchester I think she was 90 odd but if she was born in 1896 and she died in 1979 I should be able to work that out. But you are working it out quicker. [laughs]

ST: So you have mentioned some of the influences you think she had on you and the ideas that were coming from WILPF in those days, the fact that she had travelled to Moscow for this conference, did she go on any other trips do you know?

PS: Not that she talked to me about or I can remember because we are going back quite a way. She had a lot of influence on me as did my Father politically. I think when my Father first came to this country and lived with her he was a member of the Communist Party. As he got his English language and he got a degree and he went into industry he realised that he wouldn't get a job with ICI if he was a member of the Communist Party. So then the Labour Party came in and she was very strongly Labour, which is probably why I ended up as a Labour Councillor for so many years. [laughs]. So her influence politically ...and they were secular, my father did not practice Judaism. She did practice it when I was a child. We used to have the sabbath every Saturday, but they were secular Jews. They were not into all the traditional stuff.

So there were influences there of different countries because there were relatives, not many relatives, and friends, that used to come and stay at her house when I was there from different places and again my Father had that,

because he was....

ST: And any other WILPF women that you were aware of in those years?

PS: Not that I could remember accurately. There probably were some of the Liverpool branch members. But when I had some time 2006/7 I started looking through some of her documents that was when I looked on the internet to see if it still existed which is when I became a member because I found that it did exist. So I was very pleased. She influenced me to join - bit late. [laughs]

ST: That.. that's very interesting you felt that. You waited until you felt you had the time.

PS: I had the time and also I had the sense to think well that if it still exists I can probably find it on the internet because I had no where else to search. Yes and now I am in London I can help out as much as I can.

ST: So the name Ruth Osborn does not mean anything to you. Because she was a member of the Liverpool Branch but I am not sure it was the same time.

PS Not ringing any bells. There was a lady, a Christian lady, because my Aunt did not have any prejudices called Connie Cruise, who may possibly have been, because she was very involved with everything my Great Aunt did. I don't know if that name.....

ST No. There was someone called Edith or Ellen Dransfield, something like that.

PS: The names will be if they did recipes should be at the bottom of these recipes as well There is a Mrs Perry, a Mrs Bennington, Mrs Benson, Mrs Booth Mrs. Brunton. Quite a few names here which, I am guessing would have been mainly WILPF members. But I did not personally know them, but even if I did I was a child and don't have much memory of it.

But she was an inspiring lady, my Great Aunt. As I say, she was quite ...she did not have any children of her own but she was certainly not a maternal aunt but she had a lot of intelligence and a lovely way. Everybody felt welcome there even if she was little bit offhand sometimes.

ST: And did she work at any stage of her life?

She worked as a teacher. She used to teach biology when she was still in Russia I have a photograph of her in Russia with these all boys in strange clothes. I think then when she married my uncle Alex she didn't work. I don't know why whether it was just the way that it was in those days. I can't remember her working anytime after that.

ST: She might have been of retirement age by then.

PS: Yes. But I mean she supported, did the home in the old-fashioned way with everything homemade. There was always loads of cakes and always loads of visitors, typical housewife but with her other interests her politics, her WILPF, and possibly other things I don't know about. [laughs]

ST Are there some other ideas which you want to share with us about your Aunt, your Great Aunt

PS: My great Aunt. I can't think of anything else. I am just very proud that she was my Great Aunt because she was a wonderful lady and the fact that she took my Father in when he was 16/17 and he had a home with them. She must have been going through a lot of upset herself with what was going on with the rest of the family. But she, when she did die, the photographs that she had eventually came down to me. So it meant that I have been able to research the rest of the family and naturally with my daughters go back to Poland which is the same area Bialystock and see all the things they talked about. So I only did that this year. That has been great.

ST: Do you want to say some more about that?

Only that my Father's brother he escaped from Poland. He was 4 years older than my father, and he escaped and got false papers and ended up in Israel as a solicitor. And they kept in touch a little bit. I went to stay with them when I was 15. And then over the years lost touch and through Facebook, which I am not advertising for at all, my cousin who is now 52, I last saw him when he was 5, has managed to get in touch with me because I had done research in the museums in Bialystok that alerted him, he was trying to find out about his father. So we are actually back in contact. My cousins one in Canada and one in New York so my cousins are in touch with me and I am in touch with them.

My Aunt Mercha when she did die, she separated her money out and for each of the four of us got the same amount of money which helped us all set up what we were doing at that time So the link....

ST: How old was your Father when he.... You said how old he was but what year was that when he came ....

PS: He came in 1938/39 I am still on the photographs I have still got one in Warsaw in 1938. His naturalization papers only come from 1947 when he was in the army and I can't find any other incoming documents of how he arrived as a passenger. So I have got pictures of him in Liverpool in school boy's uniform in 1939. So some time 38/39. So he was 16 going on 17 without any English. He told me when he travelled here he had to fill a form in and so he put whether he was male or female he put "m a i l" because he did not understand the English language of the male and female [laughs]

ST: Very good. So you spent some energy in looking into your family. Family is obviously important feature for you and for your Great Aunt, I

think .

PS: Definitely and to share that with my own daughters one of which is 40 next week the other 38, goes on down to their children and its....

"History is to society as memory is to the individual"

ST: Ah....Who's that?

PS: That's Arthur Marwick who is an open university tutor. But yes its that sense of belonging and where you come from is important especially when you have travelled round a bit. [laughs]

ST So maybe you would like to say something about yourself in relation to WILPF .You did say a little bit before about how you decided to join and maybe a little bit about WILPF itself where you think it should be going and....

PS: I think that it is doing an amazing job the only thing that upsets me is so few people know about it, so I personally do my best to advertise it and publicise it as I can. I am trying to think...I am not a feminist but I do believe that women have far more common-sense and to actually stand a chance of getting peace I think a woman's organisation is the only way to go. I can't think what else. I am happy to do anything I can to help, but I don't particularly want a job anywhere, so in a voluntary capacity I am quite happy to do anything.

And It will come. I mean we have got bits of news around now we are getting back to pushing nuclear disarmament. I managed to get a motion through at my local branch in Hackney and now Hackney has adoped the re-commitment to nuclear disarmament. So If a few branches do that obviously the Labour party, you never know things might put a bit of pressure on. I am a little cynical these days, but I not cynical about WILPF at all.

ST: When you were a Councillor what were the years of that.

PS 1996 -2006 in the London Borough of Croydon

ST: And what did you feel you could do in local government. I mean you obviously stood as a Councillor, Labour Councillor because you felt there was something there for you to do.

PS: I had worked for local government from early 80s. I tried to change things for young people, not got very far just a little bit. So I thought that if I went in as a representative maybe I will able to change things that way. I did change a few things, a couple of things I was really proud of, but most of it is a nightmare of trying to get change to happen, same with MPs and the civil service. The officers always want to have things done their way and if you get some sort of new idea its very hard to get that through but we did change a few things very hard to get that through But we did end up with an

excellent children's service unfortunately its gone now We did end up with modernised homes for elderly people especially with dementia, which was bit of a risk at the time but in the end everywhere had to do it , so there were a few things that we changed, a lot more that could have been changed.

I really enjoyed it. I had ended up deputy leader which I don't think I enjoyed as much because it was all the meetings with all chief execs everywhere and being scrutinized by the Mayor of London at City Hall and things like that. But I think the role I did enjoy the most was the sort of thing my Great Aunt used to do, not as a councillor but helping people with their housing problems or pointing them in the right direction, not ....getting through the system for them sort of casework for people in the wards that I represented, was the best bit. I have thought of doing that again but I think grandchildren take precedence [laughs]

ST: Now one of the things that interests me is that first your Great Aunt was at home when she was active and also when you were at work you weren't involved with WILPF. Is there something to say there about how we engage women in the working years and so on?

PS: I think what I saw with the excellent seminar on Saturday when you have got young students getting involved. I think if we, WILPF, can get them while they are at that stage they will stick with it. I think in the past maybe its been an older age group and we don't go on for ever so its really important to get young blood and I think the link with SOAS and with the other other organisations thats the answer to getting passionate young people involved. But there is, there is a huge gap with the sort of I don't know, late 20s 30s 40s of getting the message over. But if we get them in their late teens 20s hopefully they will stay WILPF members and it will pass on. There is a need to sort of advertise it more. But there is very cynical apathy out there for any orgnaisation that is trying to do the right thing, which is us.

But there must be some other way.. ...into stalls. You know everybody trying that.

ST: And the other thing that is in my mind is about, we have in WILPF this voice at the international level or at these fora and then we are also on the ground locally, is there something to say there about how we are able to link people up into that?

PS: Well the website is very good. I mean that people who have got a particular interest like I have Rebecca Johnson's Ban the Bomb, you can find out more and more and that is very very open. So If anyone has got a particular side of peace that they want to go for. Its through the website which is brilliant. I have lost track now....[laughs] Sorry!

ST That's fine. Is there any thing else that you feel you want to, you

haven't had an opportunity to say that you want to say to leave for people to think about and so on.

PS: Personally I felt I could get more involved when I moved to London. I think where I lived before in North East Lincolnshire is the back end of the world I wasn't aware of any other members, around there , and I don't know how we get out to the rest of the country. I know we are international but we do need to do have to actually reach other parts of the country with your recent good news on Cornwall. But somehow, I don't know how. Missions out to the back of beyond I don't know how we do it. But the website is one way to go to let people know about that. I don't know.

ST: Good. That is all very good and interesting. Thank you very much for doing that.

PS: That's all right . Its a pleasure.

\* Paula later explained that her Father was the first Jewish Labour Councillor in Liverpool.