

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

I happened to be back in Nelson [*where Leonard's folks still lived*] for a weekend and was reading through a copy of "Peace News", the weekly paper of Dick Sheppard's Peace Pledge Union, when I noticed a small paragraph in it referring to the fact that the PPU was setting up a mobile film unit and were looking for a suitable person to operate it. Upon returning to Burton [*where Leonard was living and working at that time*] I wrote to PPU HQ in Regent Street, London and applied for the job. A few days later I received a friendly letter inviting me to travel up to see them, and this I did.

When I arrived at HQ my first impression was one of bewilderment, for everything seemed to be chaos. People were rushing about, full of infectious optimism, in and out of each other's offices, joyfully calling each other by their Christian names, and it was quite impossible to tell who was in charge of what or indeed whether anyone really knew! Eventually, I discovered that the person who had been delegated – or who, more likely had volunteered – for the film exhibiting responsibility was Nigel Spottiswoode, scion of the famous publishing family, and lately down from Cambridge.

He was a charming, if somewhat "fey" sort of person, with that kind of appeal which, I am sure, would have made most women want to mother him. He showed me the projector – a 16 millimeter sound-on-film RCA, and told me that the film I would be exhibiting was a German classic, "Kameradschaft" [*a 1931 film with English sub-titles – here's it's description, courtesy of the Internet: A mine disaster in a French/German border town leads to an extraordinary display of worker solidarity. The Germans, whose economy has collapsed, attempt to get jobs in a French mine. They are treated brutally by the French who carry bitter memories of the First World War. National prejudices melt away as the Germans dig furiously to save their seemingly doomed comrades trapped in a mine cave-in.*] and that the show would consist of this and a short preceding film in which Dick Sheppard spoke of the origins and aims of the PPU, and a brief closing speech by Stuart Morris asking that any of those present who agreed with us should sign the Pledge "I renounce war and will never support or sanction another", and join us in working for peace.

The salary I was to receive was three pounds per week, and hospitality with local PPU groups would be arranged for me wherever I went to give the show. The transport provided was an old Ford 8 saloon, and with considerable care plus brute force it was possible to get all the equipment except the screen stowed inside. The screen, which was in a case, had to be tied on the roof. I accepted the job, returned to Burton to give in my notice and thereafter traveled north to Nelson. A few days later I joined Nigel at Halifax where he gave our first show. The following day we went in to Harrowgate and gave a show in the Winter Gardens under considerable technical difficulties. The next day Nigel left me and returned to London, and as there were no shows booked until four days later I went back to Nelson and familiarized myself with the equipment by giving repeated showings in the living room.

From then on, throughout that winter, I traveled back and forth and up and down the country giving shows in all sorts of places and under all kinds of conditions. To go into detail would require pages of writing – and all of it probably of no more than passing interest to anyone except myself. Suffice it to say that a very considerable amount of traveling was involved, since bookings were never made in any sort of order to minimize

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

this and were merely taken as they were received. This resulted in one hilarious week when I traveled from Epsom to Burnley, thence to Mountain Ash, Glamorgan, Runcorn, Cheshire, and finally back to Carshalton in Surrey. I was involved in one accident, just north of Bedford, which resulted in the vehicle being off the road for a week whilst undergoing repairs amounting to a total cost of some fifty pounds. Luckily no one was injured.

When Spring and Summer came it would not have been a practicable idea to continue with film shows, and so it was decided to buy a new Morris ten hundredweight van and equip it with PA equipment, using it to hold outdoor public meetings. At the time of the changeover I was in Carlisle and Nigel drove the new van and equipment up there to meet me. There was some small mechanical trouble with the new van due to the gearbox being faulty but this was soon put right and the publicity tour began. The PA equipment was capable of a considerable output and we had no difficulty in attracting crowds.

Meetings were held all over the country, in towns and villages, with audiences varying in size from a handful to several hundreds. Most of these audiences were interested and well behaved, and we had no rowdiness at any of them.

As remarked a paragraph or two ago, this period of approximately two years duration was full of incident, but I now realize that if ever I am to finish this narrative at all it will be necessary to dispense with a lot of such detail. As one moves in time nearer to the present one can remember more and more, and as at the time reached at this period in the story I was only 23 years of age and I am, at the time of writing, now 55, it is evident that either some economy of writing will have to be made or I shall tire of the task and abandon it.

So to continue; from the time from 1937 until the start of the war in September 1939 I drove the van, winter and summer, up and down the country, stopping only when there were no bookings for it, which was seldom. On occasion I was six or seven weeks at a time on the road each day, but occasionally there was a lull and I then would help out at Head Office (Regent Street) in any way possible, and would put up at a bed-and-breakfast place in Guildford Street, Bloomsbury.

During this period, too, I was married; in June 1939 I married Minnie Bland. I had known Minnie before we went to America, [*Leonard was 8 years old when his family emigrated there and 19 when they returned to England*] as our families had always been friendly, and I had been pleased to meet her again on my return and to find that by then she had grown into an attractive, intelligent and vivacious young woman. Off and on during the time that I have described since my return from the USA I had been out with Minnie. I had also been interested in a few other girls, of course, and had been through a few highly emotional experiences with some of them, but somehow these passed and, again, details of these can hardly be of interest to anyone except myself and the others involved – and they have probably forgotten them by now. So it seemed that it was to be Minnie in the end, since she, too, whilst also having her own experiences always seemed to be there when I needed her.

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

In this way we, I suppose, rather "drifted" into marriage. She and her father found and furnished a little stone cottage at Roughlee – which you will remember is over the hill (Nogarh) and in the valley (Happy Valley) on the way to Pendle [*Madge remembers walking over there from Nelson to visit them*]. This was while I was on tour with the van, and I left it in Westmoreland long enough to go to Nelson and get married. We were married at Wheatley Lane Methodist Chapel, and after a few days off I returned to the van and Minnie to her teaching; she was a nursery school teacher [*Madge greatly admired Minnie and, as a result, also became a teacher*].

Looking back on this period I am rather staggered both at the casual way we entered into this marriage and by the fact that we expected it to endure when we continued to be separated by our work. The thought that it might not stand such a strain never, so far as I can recall, occurred to us. I traveled back home when work permitted and on one occasion was off work due to flu for about a month. On another occasion Minnie joined me on the van for a week or so and by these means we saw each other as often as possible. We also went via a CWS cargo boat from Liverpool to Rouen for 13 days, and apart from a terrible seasickness I suffered in the early part of the voyage we enjoyed it very much – especially traveling on a sightseeing trip to Versailles and Paris. It is true that both on the ship and on the van Minnie did a bit of flirting with other males but I was to some extent amused and even, if you understand, pleased that other men found her attractive and I was the lucky one to have her. I only mention this latter in view of what later transpired.

The situation politically in Europe was rapidly worsening, and in September came the declaration of war by Neville Chamberlain. At the time, I was with the publicity van in Norfolk, and it was decided by the PPU that the van should be taken off the road. After putting it in a garage at Beccles I returned home by train. Soon afterwards I was requested to go to London HQ and help out in the office, so once again I left Roughlee and went back to lodgings in Guilford Street.

There followed a period of a few months during which I was far from well or happy. I had a small and uncomfortable room at the B&B place, and what with that and the fact that the food was poor and I was extremely lonely, especially at weekends, I became very run-down and eventually caught a heavy cold, which I could not shake off. Finally I became so unwell that I was unable to continue and on doctor's orders had to take to my bed; he said I had a "tired heart". But this seems now to me to be a euphemism for being thoroughly run-down and needing a rest. The circumstances under which I was living were not conducive to an early recovery, but after a few weeks I became sufficiently better to travel home.

After I had been home a week or two and had recovered sufficiently Minnie and I traveled down to Burton to spend a weekend at Uncle Arthur's and during that weekend Minnie, with what I can only now regard as misplaced honesty, told me that she had recently been on the brink of an affair with a young married man who, with his wife and young child, occupied the cottage behind ours at Roughlee. She assured me that it was all over and had never developed beyond a few kisses, but you will understand what an emotional shock this was to me. You can say – as I would now – that the sort of life we were living was inviting this kind of trouble, and it seemed clear to me that, since there

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

was no hope of my getting work in Nelson then Minnie would have to give up her job and we would have to live in London. She made no objections to this, since I think she also realized the danger of continuing in our separate lives if our marriage was to survive and the possible dangers of being bombed in London seemed the lesser of two evils. We went to London and after "going the rounds" of the estate agents, finally secured a top floor flat in Randolph Avenue, Maida Vale and moved in a week or two later. Minnie came to work in the literature dispatch department at the PPU, and I was in charge of that department.

For a time all went reasonably well and on the whole we were fairly happy, although temperamentally we were almost too much alike to provide a satisfactory balance for each other. Also, of course, the uncertainty of the demands the war would make upon us and our consequent inability to see or provide for any future put an unseen and indeed unrecognized strain upon us. There passed a summer of waiting for the unknown, with barrage balloons floating on high at almost every other street corner – a reminder of the menace which was always there. The PPU, predictably, wilted and as the demand for literature faded it became evident that it could not indefinitely support both of us and it therefore came as no surprise when Minnie's services were no longer required.

The life of a domestic housewife in a small flat was not a very demanding one for Minnie and though at first the novelty of it appealed to her, inevitably and understandably before long she found it inadequate and found time beginning to drag. We did what we could to amuse ourselves at the weekends, visiting friends in Hampstead and so on and even going Youth Hostelling once or twice, but these measures were hardly sufficient to offset the weekday tedium for her and the fact that we were now having a struggle to make ends meet did not help either. On at least one occasion Minnie was invited to have a cup of coffee with the odd predatory male she somehow seemed to meet on her domestic round, and remembering the all-too-recent past I began to worry a little about what may happen.

During this period we used to read the "New Statesman" – both being, as we thought, left wing progressives, and one week we saw an advertisement which was completely to alter our lives. This advert was to the effect that a small London private school – Fortis Green – evacuated to Bedfordshire, was looking for – primarily – a trained nursery school teacher who believed in modern methods, with a husband who could act as gardener-handyman and take a turn occasionally in teaching the older children carpentry. This seemed to offer possibilities for both of us and we went along to see them.

As a consequence of this interview we were accepted – although I was really only a make-weight; it was Minnie they wanted and would have preferred on her own. We were to have one pound per week each, a room of our own (which we furnished with our own rapidly depleting stock of furniture), and our keep. This was far from affluence, but it offered us a chance to get out of London and start what we hoped may be a pleasant and meaningful life.

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

Aspley House, Aspley Guise, which is where the school was, stands in a small village near Woburn Sands, on the edge of the Duke of Bedford's estate. It is a large two story building, topped by what, presumably, used to be the servants' quarters and which was used by the school staff at this time, the children's dormitories being on the floor below and the class rooms on the ground floor. There are extensive gardens and orchards at the rear, enclosed by a high brick wall, and large lawns on three sides. All these required considerable work to maintain, but I managed, with the aid of an elderly man who came in daily from the village, to cope with this and looking after the boiler which supplied hot water. I also coped with the occasional handyman job which came along.

To say I was happy and contented during this period would be to exaggerate somewhat. I was the only male adult on the place, and there were nine or ten females, so that I was rather starved of male companionship. We were virtually isolated from the village life as the villagers regarded the school with great suspicion, so that we saw no outsiders except at weekends when such of the children's parents who could, came to see their offspring. Minnie was rather happier, for she was once again doing the job for which she was trained and which she much enjoyed.

At this school your mother was matron. She was in sole charge of the health and well being of the children, and as you would imagine, made an excellent job of seeing them well fed and cared for at a time of severe food rationing.

She was small, weighing not much more than seven and a half stone, and had very fair, golden hair, cut in a shingled bob and with a fringe. She was, as ever, very determined and forthright and I can recall seeing her on more than one occasion doing battle with the rather formidable headmistress, Beatrix Tudor-Hart, and emerging victorious. She was always unafraid – unlike me – and my heart even then began to go out to this small, delicately made woman who, with eyes flashing, was prepared to "take on" the whole world if need be, and I guess that, without knowing it, I was already beginning to feel in love with her.

After a while things began to move for me in connection with the war. At the time we were in London I had to register, as did everyone else of military age, and I had registered as a conscientious objector. This meant that, sooner or later, I would have to appear before a tribunal and try to prove to their satisfaction that my objection was genuine. I was called to appear before the tribunal at Cambridge, and as a result of that hearing I was registered as a CO "conditional upon my remaining in employment at the private school". The tribunal was presided over by a very pleasant individual, who I seem to recall was a High Court Judge, and who was doing his best to administer a piece of social nonsense – the ascertaining of the validity of a man's conscience.

I regret to say that, lacking both experience and humility at that time, I took umbrage at the tribunal accepting that my objection was genuine and yet placing a condition on my interpretation of how I could best apply myself to serve the community but not the war effort. In short, I felt that I should have been accorded unconditional exemption and so I lodged an appeal to have my case re-heard at the Appeal Tribunal.

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

About this time I began to feel unsettled at the school. The factors I have already mentioned were no doubt contributory to this feeling and I began to find myself increasingly resentful at seeming to be little more than an evil which the headmistress had to accept in order to have Minnie's services. Consequently, I began to get a bit difficult and this "bloody mindedness" finally focused itself on the boiler. The HM felt, and stated openly in the staff meetings (Heaven protect you from such ordeals!) that I ought to rise at about 5 am and get this wretched thing going so that hot water would be readily and plentifully available when the rest of the staff, and the children, arose. To this I replied that my day was already long enough considering all I was expected to do and that I was not prepared to extend it still further. Thus we reached deadlock, and as neither of us would yield the HM later raised the matter at the meeting of the school's governors and it was decided I should be asked to resign. I could, I suppose, have asked to have my side of the case heard, but as it was seriously suggested at this Board meeting that this only applied to me and that they would very much like Minnie to remain I felt that it would be better to hold my breath and my temper, so accordingly I rather acidly resigned and Minnie did the same.

At the time of this resignation we had no place to which to go, but fortunately we were invited to join the pacifist Hillside Community, at the other end of the village, and this we were pleased to do.

We had come across this community quite accidentally one afternoon whilst going for a walk. We had been walking along a lane some half a mile from the school when we came to a hut standing at the edge of a cultivated field. There were two or three young men outside this hut, and they were obviously of military age. It was strange to see young people out of uniform unless they were obviously farm-worker types, which these were not. We struck up a conversation with them and it presently emerged that they were C.O.s voluntarily living together in a house in the village and working together on this 40 acre parcel of ground. They had pooled their financial resources to make this possible, though most of the capital had been provided by one of them – Graham Roberts – whose father (now deceased) had held a responsible position in the Indian Civil Service. We were invited to visit them at their house in Wood Lane, and this we did a few days later.

There were several members of the community at that time; apart from Gray and his wife, Muriel, there was a middle-aged woman whose name now escapes me (Simonette!), Edward, Fred and John, not to mention odd ones who came for a day or two at a time. The "permanent" residents were all exempted from military service conditional upon doing land work and the visitors who came from time to time were before or between tribunals and seldom stayed long. At the time we were invited to join the community, it was in its second year.

Fortunately, we did not possess much furniture, so there was little trouble occasioned by the removal and we were soon installed as residents. I went to work on the land, and Minnie helped in the house.

It was not an easy period in which to live, for by this time the war had entered a new phase and bombing was fairly widespread. Planes were heard overhead most nights

## Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography

and on one occasion a small German plane had flown over the school and dropped a stick of bombs – which were presumably intended to fall in the village, but which fortunately overshot the target. Nightly raids on most of the main cities were a commonplace and no one knew what further developments may be imminent. Although we were a segregated “community within a community” we were conscious of the growing world misery and our own insecurity and this, together with the day-to-day living in such close proximity to each other proved something of a strain which I am sure we all felt.

During the first few months we were at Hillside, I received notice to appear before the Appeal Tribunal in London, and I went along to have my case heard. This time, unlike the first hearing at Cambridge, there was no feeling of relaxed consideration in the air and it soon became evident that I was going to receive short shrift on this occasion. I heard one of the members of the tribunal suggest that they dismiss my appeal, whereupon another pointed out that as I had already left the school they could not do that. In the end they decided to disallow my appeal and ordered that I be placed as liable to be called up for non-combatant duties in the army. This was a blow to my hopes and, I suppose I must admit it, to my pride, and I came away from the appeal feeling both bitter and hopeless, and returned chastened and battered to the community to await further developments. These were not so very long in coming, as I fairly soon received a notice to attend for an army medical examination at Bedford.

After considering the implications of taking the examination, I decided to do so. If I had refused, then, theoretically at least, I could have been repeatedly imprisoned for this refusal and would have not been entitled to have my case re-heard. In fact, many C.O.s were imprisoned for six months or more (your cousin Richard [*Gill Sidwell's deceased husband who also greatly admired Minnie and remained in touch with her for many years after she and Leonard separated*] was one of them) for such a refusal, but as it transpired few, if any, of them were imprisoned a second time. I had to make a decision the only way one could be sure of getting one's case re-heard was to take the medical and then, when called up, refuse to serve. This refusal would, in the end, mean a court-martial, for after being medically examined one was automatically in the services and in my case I would thus be subject to army law. At the court-martial I would have to plead that my refusal to serve was due to conscientious objection, and at the same time, ask the court-martial to award me a sentence of “not less than three months”. If they accepted my guilty plea and request for the sentence I would, during the period of serving it, be entitled once again to have my case re-heard. Of course if my appeal was still not upheld I would remain in the army and if I still refused to serve the whole process would be repeated – except that the prison sentences would become ever stiffer. I later met one C.O. who had failed his appeal and who, on the second sentence had been sentenced to two years imprisonment. He was a simple half-Italian lad who was heartbroken and bewildered by the savagery of it, and I was much moved with pity for him and despair at the blindness of humanity – he would never, under any circumstances, conceivably have made a useful soldier and the sentence passed upon him was entirely punitive.

So I went to Bedford and took the medical, and after much prodding and poking by a succession of five doctors who were each specifically interested in only their own part of

## **Extract from Leonard Sidwell's Autobiography**

my anatomy and finally a sixth who looked at me as a whole person I was pronounced fit to serve.

By this time my marriage to Minnie had ended and if I gloss over this and my subsequent union with your mother, you will understand that the reasons, causes and events are all too private and personal, both to myself and others, ever to write them and I will thus pass over a period of perhaps a year, during which time much transpired and at the end of which your mother and I were living in and sharing a flat with two others in Gloucester Place, off Marylebone Road in London.