

12. Philip Abrams going to Cambridge

DA: So, let's just find out where we are a bit more. Philip must have been coming up to around about 18 ... must have been leaving school, more or less by that time.

MA: He was leaving school. He had been at Worthing Grammar School then and ...

DA: How did he do there? What was his school performance like:

MA: Well, he was ambivalent about it. He liked some of the teachers. He felt he knew more than some of the teachers [laughs] – which is probably right. And he wanted to get to a good university. He felt he was ready for a good university. So I spoke to Dennis Brogan, at the Reform Club, we met and I said, “Look, I have a son called Philip. And its time for him to be going to university. What do you think?” And Brogan, who had been at Peterhouse, during the war you see when the LSE had moved out, said, “The place to go if he is interested in history is Peterhouse. “Got more fellows than they’ve got students ...[laughs]” which wasn’t quite true, but it seemed like that. And it’s the place for historians to go. “Tell him to apply to Peterhouse. He’d be interviewed and so on.” Which Philip did. They said, “Fine, you are in.” And that was a great boost to him. ‘Cause he enjoyed Cambridge a great deal. He met new friends ... friends who he thought were his intellectual equal, which he hadn’t had at Worthing you see. People like Affleck¹, Thirlby, Cornford. You know, they were just as bright as Philip in their own way ... some were a little misguided, one or two thought a little too highly of communism [laughs], but anyway they were interesting. And he was bringing them along ... by that time we were living in the Boltons² I think ... and he was bringing them along and it was fine to have them there. Occasionally he would ask if we would move out so that he could have a party there [laughs].

DA: What was he like with Evelyn? She must have been ... she was around at that time. How much younger was she?

¹ Sonia Jackson comments: James Affleck (best man at our wedding), Peter Thirlby, both members of CUSC [Cambridge University Socialist Club]. James Cornford, son of John, grandson of Francis and Frances, later Director of Nuffield, was my friend more than Philip’s.

² A large flat in Kensington



Evelyn Abrams and Philip Abrams, 1952

MA: [19] Thirty three to [19] thirty eight – five years younger ...

DA: So the same gap as myself and Rebecca. Now, how did they get on?

MA: They got on pretty well. She liked him. He felt a sort of fatherly interest in her progress. It was rather a strange fatherly interest in the sense that he was more inclined to deprecate and laugh at some things she thought were smart and good. But clearly they got on okay. But by the time he went to Cambridge he was very much caught up with Cambridge life. And there were a few occasions where I met people at Cambridge. Like Postan³, who was the Professor of Economic History there, who was very good and who I believe was a historian.

³ Sonia Jackson adds: Munier (Michael) Postan, a Russian, one of the leading Cambridge historians of the time, married to Lady Cynthia. His first wife was Eileen Power, a medieval historian, author of a famous biography of Peter Abelard it is Boston?

He then got a year's fellowship at Oxford⁴, I think, didn't he? Went off to St. Antony's, one of the new colleges there, but he almost immediately went back to Peterhouse. And I remember him telling me two things at Peterhouse. When he reached the age of 25, he got a notice from the War Office saying when you become 26 you will no longer be liable to be called up for military service. And therefore will you report to the military tribunal next Monday, or Tuesday or whatever it was. So, Philip duly turned up and then said, no, he is a conscientious objector. "What?" "Against it". They said, "On religious grounds?" He said "Oh no, no, not religious grounds". That didn't help! If he'd have said on religious grounds they'd have said, "Oh thank God, beat it!" But no he wasn't going to have it on those grounds. And they said, "You'd better do work of national importance of some kind. I don't think you will be much good in the coal mines." Philip said, "No, I don't think I'd be much good in the coal mines. What else is there?" By this time they were getting pretty fed up and they said "Oh we can think of something for you to do. Why don't you go into the distributive trade and help in a shop". So Philip went and got a job with the Cambridge Co-operative Society delivering milk⁵ [laughs]. Two things: He apparently did his job well. The round delivery started at 6 in the morning ... he was there on time always.

But three things I remember from there: first of all, that he used to take on other people's rounds as well, in the afternoon⁶, so as to get more money ... he always needed money, Philip. And the other thing was that he was going around one day with the milkman and Butterfield, head of Peterhouse, saw him and said, "What are you doing there? Get down, get back to your duties" [laughs]. And Philip said, "No, I am on military service." Butterfield said "You clown! ⁷ You are suppose to be working on [John] Locke." And Philip said, "That's what I do in the afternoon ... I work on John Locke", and he explained the situation.

Audio Note⁸

MA: He fell off one morning, off his milk delivery van and broke a wrist⁹. He was taken into Addenbrookes and they set it, but they set it badly, so he had to go back. It was broken and reset again. And then he got an honourable discharge from the military duties¹⁰ [laughs].

⁴ Arranged by Peter Laslett

⁵ Sonia Jackson comments: This was arranged through the Labour Party in which Philip and I were both much involved. Philip had to get a heavy goods driving license

⁶ Sonia Jackson notes: This seems to be a misapprehension. There were no afternoon rounds and in fact Philip used all his spare time for his PhD

⁷ Sonia Jackson notes: This is an expression Mark used but it is improbable that Butterfield would have used it. The story seems inconsistent because the Master's Lodge was not part of Philip's round

⁸ Tape 3 starts here, audio file: Marktape4

⁹ According to Sonia Jackson, Philip fell off a ladder putting up Christmas decorations in the youth club they ran in Swavesey. It was his elbow not his wrist that was broken. It must have been 1957, just before Dominic was born. It was a bad break and NHS did not set it properly, so Mark ended up paying for it to be redone privately.

DA: At what point did he meet Sonia? This must have been fairly around about that time?

MA: It was around about that time¹¹. He was already I think, yes I am sure he was, a research assistant¹² because he spent his summer holidays, usually, with Jean and me in France ... first of all in Provence around Avignon, then later on in Burgundy, where he'd go away with us.

DA: He became very attached to those areas.

MA: He loved it ... God ... I've never seen anyone enjoy a holiday so much. Even when he was stopped by a French gendarme, who obviously thought, 'this uppity, adolescent, loafing around Orange'. And he came over and said in French to Philip ... "Show me your papers". He said, "Of course", and produced his British passport, and said, "I am a tourist". Gendarme said, "Ah",motioned him on, defeated. But he always enjoyed those holidays. We would say, "You've got to get up at 6 o'clock tomorrow morning 'cause the only bus to wherever it is goes at 7 from the city gates and we must be there." He was there ahead of us. And he would occasionally do some absolutely barmy things. I don't know if he ever took you to Pont du Gard, that great bridge, viaduct across the mountains, the hills, which the Romans had built as a viaduct. He climbed all the way up the side of the hill, on top of the parapet of this thing, and began walking along it. It made me dizzy just to look at him [laughs], but we daren't shout at him ... he wouldn't have heard us anyway ... we thought, "Oh God we'd better keep our eyes closed." But he was enjoying it ... he thought it was terrific. And also he was, on those holidays, there was always the historian there. You know, when we took him once to Villeneuve lès Avignon, which was across the river from Avignon itself. This great medieval fortress. And he said, "Now one can see the brutality and the violent side of feudalism". That great massive fortress there, which was the quintessence of brutalism in architecture. No, no, it was a great joy to be with him on holiday in places like that.

¹⁰ More precisely, the Coop dairy department had no further use for him because he couldn't carry milk crates any more.

¹¹ Sonia and Philip met in 1954 and married in September 1956.

¹² He may have been assisting Peter Laslett while working on his PhD



Philip with Jean, Lac de Pont, 1955

And then, when we were in Burgundy the second time, in his third year, when he got a cable from his tutor saying, “A First”. Very pleased.” And the *monsieur le patron* wanted to know, was there any trouble, they’d never had a cable in that little village before. So, in such French as we could muster between the three of us¹³, we explained to him. And that night for dinner he produced not only the usual food, but a special bottle of Corton Charnay. The very finest burgundy wine you could possibly get and he said, “For Monsieur le Victor”, putting it in front of Philip,

Well, anyway that was those years.... So we first saw Sonia when we were in Cambridge to see him, one afternoon after he had graduated and a young girl passed by on a bicycle. And she beamed at Philip, and Philip sort of looked a little embarrassed, and walked on. And we didn’t say anything ... obviously he didn’t want to say anything, so what could we do? Then when we were introduced to Sonia sometime later, we recognised her as the girl on the bicycle! [laughs].

But I remember him going when he was a Cambridge, to see Butterfield, and say that, “Sure he was giving lectures and supervisions on British 17th/18th century political thought. What he would like to do, would be to get around to the still surviving founding members of the British Labour party, and first British Labour Parliamentary party, after World War I. Interview them, get down their accounts of how Attlee had happened, and bring together some archive material which they must have in their homes”. And Butterfield said, “Oh you

¹³ Philip spoke excellent French. Una was a modern linguist and had ensured both Philip and Evelyn were fluent in French as children. They had to speak French every day at home.

mean journalism you want to go into?”, and Philip said, “No, history”. Butterfield said, “I would call it journalism, Philip.” And Philip gave up. He knew that he wouldn’t be allowed to do that.

DA: What were you doing during that time? So we are coming up more or less to the time ... he must have married Sonia sometime ...

MA: Yea. Oh God did we have a wrangle about that! It went on and on. Neither of them wanted to get married in a synagogue. But Maurice¹⁴ was furious about this. How he carried on. His dear old Dad would die if he heard the news. And they couldn’t keep the news from him. If anything like this to disgrace the family ... why didn’t I talk to him and why didn’t I insist? I was the father of the bridegroom, and the bridegroom had the final word on this. I said, “All right I will talk to Philip about it.” Philip said, he doesn’t see any point in it, they can go to a Registry Office, pay the fee and get married. That seems to them the important thing. And they didn’t think much of this lark of going off to a synagogue and stamping on a goblet, under a canopy. And, Sonia was just as insistent as well. And I said, “Well look, you know, as far as you are concerned, you know that going to the synagogue thing does not really do any harm, any damage to your marriage, and you have the bonus that it would give some pleasure to Maurice’s father, you know, and it won’t cost you anything in terms of any sacrifice you have to make that means anything to you, because you are going to get married in a Registry Office anyway”. And he agreed. Maurice was a bit of a bastard really! [laughs]. I remember when they were getting married ... just before they were getting married – and you know the custom in Jewish families, particularly families which are so determined that weddings should take place in synagogues, and so on -- the custom is that the bride’s father makes some contribution towards the cost of the reception and the meal, and that sort of thing. And clearly Maurice had no intention of doing this¹⁵ ... so it was arranged we should have him and Tilli around to dinner one evening and I would bring up the subject. This was at The Boltons. And they came around, and after they had a good meal we moved into the comfortable front room. I put him in a nice arm chair ... and then I said, “Oh Maurice, by the way, something we ought to discuss I suppose and that is the

¹⁴ Maurice Edelman, MP. Sonia’s father.

¹⁵ Sonia Jackson comments: This is incorrect as a Jewish bride’s father would expect to pay the whole cost of the wedding and the bridegroom’s family would only contribute to incidental expenses such as a few bottles of champagne so there was never any question of expecting Mark to contribute. In fact the wedding was inexpensive because it was held at Lindisfarne (Maurice and Tilli’s family home) and the little synagogue in Amersham on the Hill. Maurice and Tilli were very disappointed at not having the opportunity to host a much grander society wedding. Mark probably believed that, at that level of society, which was upper middle class, (Sonia) was an heiress because her grandfather Harry Yager had been enormously wealthy. But in fact Maurice and Tilli, as socialists, firmly believed that adult children should support themselves. The row was because Mark was in favour of Maurice make us an allowance after the wedding, but that was against my parents’ principles. However the two sets of parents never resolved their differences.

allocation of the costs of this reception, these people are being invited, their holiday afterwards, and you know and all that sort of thing. And I thought perhaps we should go 50/50 in this (thinking this was a great gesture on my part).” And Maurice said, “50/50? I wouldn’t give them a penny. If you want them to get married, you pay for it”. And that finished the discussion [laughs]. I think Tilli was a little embarrassed, but she was very loyal to him. Anything he said was law.

DA: So that strained relations for a while?

MA: Well, we didn’t invite them around to dinner next night! [laughs]



Mark Abrams, 1956 and 1957.