

Transcript

Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner part 3

Duration: 0:29:55

START AUDIO

Presenter: The next episode of Deddington Discussions, Hilary Smith talks to Frank Steiner.

Respondent: The [?? 0:00:15] almost crossed. I got a part-time job with [Cerebus 0:00:18] because the food products they distributed were considered war work. And I was a clerk in their transport department. And at the same time worked for a BSc [?? 0:00:32] as an external student.

Interviewer: Oh yes.

Respondent: I did virtually everything in London during those days, as everybody did, on a bicycle. Though of course in the blackout that was actually-

Interviewer: Dangerous.

Respondent: That was actually disconcerting if you had a bus behind you, which wasn't allowed to switch on its headlights.

Interviewer: "Has he seen me" you wonder.

Respondent: Yes. I was knocked off my bike only once.

Interviewer: Right, in all that time.

Respondent: So... And the surprising thing is how well things worked. Despite, the post was regular, the buses ran. The tubes ran but of course tube stations were full of people sheltering during the night. And I think, I don't think I've ever once spent a night in the shelter.

Interviewer: You didn't. Is that, why is that?

Respondent: Carelessness.

Interviewer: Oh okay, you were never there at the right time, to just take it seriously and go down.

Respondent: Insouciance.

Interviewer: Okay, of youth.

Respondent: Exactly. The other thing was that of course one had one's duties. I remember still being grilled, numbering as pump crew, though I can't remember what else we did with the pump. And I don't think it's ever been used in anger. But certainly where we were was not exempt from danger. Our GP who lived a quarter of a mile away in South Hampstead was killed I think by that very real one which came down. And jumping to 1944 when I took my degree finals, there was an air raid during the history paper and that cost me 11 marks.

Interviewer: So you had to break off?

Respondent: Yes, well everybody, [?? 0:02:46] invigilators and students and examinees disappeared under desks.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Respondent: And eventually we all trooped down into the basement, where some wily people had taken their exam papers with them, and I was not wily enough for that.

Interviewer: Ah, so they continued writing and you didn't.

Respondent: Well they'd taken their crib stuff with them.

Interviewer: Oh I see.

Respondent: To which, all I can say is I wish I had. Because if I'd had those 11 extra marks I would have had a 2nd class honours degree instead of a pass. And that in the end made quite a difference to my career. But after all...

Interviewer: There were other aspects.

Respondent: Exactly. Now the, by the autumn of 1944 when I'd got my degree, the atmosphere at Cerebus was no longer all that welcoming. And I decided to do something else. Now what oh what oh what. At one time I did a research job for the Fabian Colonial Bureau, which got me into the library of then Colonial Office. I can't imagine I was paid anything more than pocket money.

But my love of St James' Park goes back to then, working in the old Colonial Office. And I remember in January 45 eating sandwiches at lunchtime because it was warm enough, and how nice to be able to eat out in January.

And now that I wasn't under pressure, I decided to have another go at the army. And with a degree in which transport was allegedly a special subject, I put myself forward for the Transport section of the Royal Engineers. In which case if they had taken me on that, I would have had [a Rec 0:04:53] Commission no less.

So I was sent to OCTU, Officer Cadet Training Unit, no further away than Golders Green, for a long weekend for training assessment. Which included all sorts of physical [jerks 0:05:14] like emotional assault course.

Interviewer: [Laughter] [Oh it would 0:05:17].

Respondent: I never knew what I could do. I mean I did actually get out of a basement, up a vertical concrete wall of about nine feet, and I still don't know how I did it.

Interviewer: You did it [Laughter].

Respondent: But I came unstuck over crossing a notionally crocodile infested river, by crossing from tree to tree or something. Anyway, I fell off a bough and was notionally eaten by the crocodiles.

Interviewer: Which would have been the end of Frank, yes.

Respondent: So they said to me "I think you'd better fly a desk." So as I had a degree, it was going to be a graduate post. So they recommended me for what was then called the Ministry of War Transport. Which on the first day after the war, crossed out the 'war' from its letterhead.

Interviewer: [Laughter] That must have been, sounds very powerful thing to do.

Respondent: Exactly. So the next thing was, gosh, forgotten how these things were. A Civil Service Selection Board presided over by Sir Percival Waterfield, the first Civil Service Commissioner. And I was accepted. And needless to say, things went well [?? 0:06:48] administration, and I ended up not in the Ministry of Transport but in the Board of Trade.

Interviewer: And so such lives are planned in odd ways. So there you are in Board of Trade.

Respondent: And because I didn't have an honours degree but only a pass degree, I couldn't sit for the establishment examination after the war. So I couldn't stay on the Board of Trade. So eventually when the OEEC, a thing which still exists but was different, cropped up, they seconded me on the grounds of I had good French and good German. So I went to Paris for nine months. Which was an extremely interesting time because I made, among other things, the OEEC in those days was not bilingual as it is now, American, Japanese and a bit of French.

Interviewer: OEEC being...

Respondent: Organisation for European Economic Cooperation. It was the Marshall Plan secretariat.

Interviewer: Yes, right.

Respondent: And there we were, suddenly pitched into genuinely French life. Because the establishments were run by the French Civil Service. At one time I was quite proud of my ability to be able to draft in a pompous way in French.

Interviewer: That must have been a fun interlude.

Respondent: It was a fun interlude. And because of my brother's pre-war connections, very strange indeed. I resumed acquaintance with a French family. And that is how, unlike a lot of the other international Civil Servants who went on living in international ghetto, I came to know something of French life and French country house life. And Rosemary and I years later were staying with friends, I mean in those days.

Interviewer: In your very early career, yes.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: So you got something very special there. Started off with your career [?? 0:09:01]. And this was in Paris?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes. And after that you joined Manchester Oil, after having gone round Spain on your, was it a moped?

Respondent: No no no, you're conflicting two things. I went round Spain by bus and train. At the time when this was still Franco's Spain and still Civil War Spain, it was not like Europe. As the French said, L'Espagne [?? 0:09:32].

Interviewer: [?? 0:09:35].

Respondent: Exactly. It was incredible how backward and poor it was. The only cars you saw were mid 1930s German imports. Because of course the Civil War had started at '36 and that was that.

Interviewer: Extraordinary. As you say, that was a kind of a time warp.

Respondent: Complete, yes. And one realised just how unpleasant Franco government was, and how oppressive. And how incredibly old-

fashioned. Because of difference in, I've forgotten what the technical term for the width, the [wheel 0:10:18] width is, not [??].

Interviewer: [?? 0:10:19].

Respondent: Yes. Of the French and European and Spanish trains. There were no through trains.

Interviewer: No, because that changed.

Respondent: Yes. So you had to get out at the border, walk across the bridge with your luggage. And on the Spanish side, believe it or not, it's incredible in the age of mass tourism, there was a civil guard sitting at a desk with pen and ink, and registered all the incoming visitors.

Interviewer: Amazing. So there must have been long queues of people sometimes.

Respondent: Yes, there weren't all that many travellers.

Interviewer: No, true.

Respondent: And the foreigner was such a rare sight in Spain in those days. I was talking to a Swedish colleague who was in the same party [?? 0:11:13] speaking English, and a young Spaniard came up and asked if he could join in because he was practicing, he wanted to practice his English. Because there weren't any other foreigners around in the [?? 0:11:31].

Interviewer: So how long were you there? Was it just-

Respondent: Just a few, Spain was less than three weeks.

Interviewer: Okay, yes. So back to work in London again.

Respondent: Back to work, back to London looking for work. Being sheltered in this [?? 0:11:52] which is Manchester Oil Refinery [?? 0:11:56] department.

Interviewer: Yes. Very interesting time to be working there, what developments [?? 0:12:03].

Respondent: Yes, with a two year interlude in Manchester. And back to London.

Interviewer: Did you find yourself interested in the chemical development areas?

Respondent: Well I suppose, I liked the scientific basis for it.

Interviewer: Okay, so didn't draw, it wasn't, you weren't drawn to it particularly?

Respondent: No, I mean it was a job.

Interviewer: It was a job, yes. So, but at that time you joined the Reform Club did you?

Respondent: Yes I [?? 0:12:36] the Reform Club. I took an interest in Liberal politics. And one of the chaps I met there, Mike [Acasa 0:12:48], who eventually became a very specialist on Russia and Eastern Euro-, I think he's still alive, he's a year younger than I. He suggested I should join the Reform. I couldn't think of why, but it sounded prestigious. And it was cheap.

In the snack, in the quick luncheon bar, not that I could afford to go the Reform for a full meal ever, you could lunch, you could have a cold lunch for 1 and 9 pence. And it was within walking distance of my office. And all the cheap cafs would have cost as much and one would had to queue and so on. So lunch time was quite agreeable. Going down to the Reform, having one's lunch in 20 minutes, going to the morning room, which I still do 60 years later. Where there's good supplies of stationery and envelopes at the desk, and do one's personal correspondence.

Interviewer: So you were drawn by the catering, by the lunches, and then just this lovely place to relax and write.

Respondent: Exactly. I get there very rarely now, but I've got a date with some old friends for lunch there on the 27th of April. Which is also, the club is much less dull than it was in those days. It now has an active social programme. And there will be an interesting music recital that lunchtime. And the same evening there's a poetry reading which doesn't attract me at all. They don't normally get two social engagements on one day. I was, I may say, for 20 years a member of the Social Committee of the Reform Club, which organised that sort of-

Interviewer: Oh I see, so you know behind the scenes stuff.

Respondent: Not necessarily.

Interviewer: So at that time also you were part, you, stringer, a part-time stringer for the Kathpress [?? 0:15:09].

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: What's that?

Respondent: The Kathpress, which still exists, and was much more of a bucket shop in those days than it is now, is the press agency owned and managed by the Austrian Bench of Bishops. The Austrian Bench of Bishops has one member responsible for media and communications. And in those days it was very much a [?? 0:15:37] thing because it was so small, it had just been started. It didn't have any full-time correspondents away, it still doesn't. But I mean in an age of telecommunications that doesn't really matter. But there weren't telecommunications.

The reason I got [?? 0:15:56] the Kathpress is very peculiar indeed. My brother had a school friend with whom he'd been both at preparatory school and at the [Shoten 0:16:07], who comes from the Western province of Carinthia. I think our fathers had been on the Italian Front at the same time. And his father had been killed in action in 1917, he'd been [?? 0:16:28] posthumously in 1918. His mother as a war widow must have had a difficult time of it with this.

And anyway, the boy, both at primary school and the [Shoten], he and my brother became firm friends. Which still remained for the next 60 or 70 years. But anyway, this boy as he then was, not the Federal, Civil Service Office of his home county which is Carinthia, married, had at that time six children, there were eventually eight. And his wife was so slight. And he hadn't, for some peculiar reason, visited London.

And my brother rang me up and said "[?? 0:17:34], look [Googy 0:17:36] is coming on Saturday, he's in London, would you like to come and join us?" And I said "Yes." I went down, very pleased to see a man whom I hadn't seen for 20 years. And in the course of conversation he mentioned that he, one of his part-time

amusements was to act as the Corinthian correspondent in Klagenfurt, the Corinthian capital, for the Kathpress. And I said “What on earth is that?” And he explained.

And he said “Look they haven’t got any corr-... I mean I’m not a journalist” he said. “If they’ve got to rely on me for local news from Carinthia, you can imagine how badly represented they are in London. Why don’t you offer to do, to send your stuff from here?” He then must have mentioned it to the editor, who invited me to submit-

Interviewer: Ah, so they took the initiative here?

Respondent: Or I may have written to the editor to say “Dr [Goodenberg 0:18:45] suggests...” I can’t honestly remember. But anyway, in those days I sent my reports, such as they were, very much limited [?? 0:19:04], the Bishops’ press agency interested in the Catholic scene in England, if there’s such a thing, and there is.

And I remember my first detailed report was on the election of I think, I’ve forgotten, anywhere in the late 50s, in which I explained the basic background, that Catholics in England were not a rustic peasantry but mainly urban industrial workers of Irish descent. And that, incredible by continental terms, the Catholic work, including [?? 0:19:44] bishop was mainly Labour.

Interviewer: Yes. So that provided them with a new perspective?

Respondent: Yes, so that was printed in full, much to my amusement, and that's what started it.

Interviewer: That started it off. So what now would you write about? Do you still write or have you just-

Respondent: No, I took my leave in 2007.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: After 52 years.

Interviewer: So are there particular issues that you wrote about [?? 0:20:18]?

Respondent: Anything which I thought to be of relevance. The whole question of the changes in the church, the Vatican Council, changes in the liturgy, the change from vernacular, from Latin to vernacular, all how that affects England.

Interviewer: I see.

Respondent: All the English Catholic community. Which of course has changed tremendously.

Interviewer: So how did you keep in touch with the Catholic community in order to represent what was happening?

Respondent: Well, there were the ordinary media, the news. There were Catholic papers, such as they were. Which I read assiduously. Which I would now find rather boring but... And of course I was in touch within because one of the social features of my life was a thing called the Newman Association, after John Henry Newman, which was the graduate section of the University Catholic Federation of Great Britain. Which was at that time very much the base of my social life, and where eventually I met my wife.

And the Kathpress has grown into quite a respectable, I mean I started sending reports in by mail and at least one or two occasions, because I couldn't, my typewriter was out of action, hand written [Laughter]. And eventually I, I mean obviously, what happened there, I've forgotten.

There was a Catholic Archbishop of Westminster called Bernard Griffin, Cardinal Griffin, who died relatively young. And I happened to be up, I don't know why I was up at that ungodly hour of the night, and on the 6 am morning news it said that Cardinal Griffin had died during the night.

So I picked up the telephone and actually sent a telegram, which one could do in those days, briefly saying what I felt. And I was asked not to go, to be so heavy-handed on expenses in future. But the Kathpress was very much a resource so often and very [junior 0:23:08] organisation.

Interviewer: Why have you kept going over so many years with it?

Respondent: Because it has grown. And the people in the Kathpress, I've seen editors come and go but there was dozen core of people who are friends, who have become friends.

Interviewer: Yes, indeed.

Respondent: And also, oh yes, question of status. As a registered UK correspondent of an Austrian press agency, I became a part of the accredited Austrian press corps at the Austrian Embassy.

Interviewer: Ah, that sounds very prestigious.

Respondent: Since when I've drunk a good many glasses of federal wine at receptions and things.

Interviewer: So you feel well remunerated in a way through wine do you, for what you do?

Respondent: Yes. Certainly it wasn't, I mean it brought in, in fees, about £200 a year, if that. It also led to something else, which is that I was asked

for two or three years during that period to broadcast in German on Radio Vaticana.

Interviewer: That was an interesting-

Respondent: Father Abraham [?? 0:24:44], the aristocratic German [?? 0:24:47] who ran and perhaps still runs the German section of Radio Vatican, read one of my Kathpress articles. And wrote to me care of the Kathpress, please forward, and said he was interested in this. I was giving a running commentary on what was happening in Parliament about the decisions of the senate, to what extent [?? 0:25:17].

And he wrote to me and said “We’re very interested that we’ve got absolutely nobody in England following that sort of thing, would you be able to let us have your usual report on that?” So I rang him and I said “Well with pleasure, what do you want and how many words?” And he said “No, we don’t want you to write, if you have something to report on that, offer it to us, and if we want it we’ll ask you to broadcast it, to record it and broadcast it.”

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Respondent: Amused. And that was extremely well paid.

Interviewer: Yes, in contrast.

Respondent: In con-

Interviewer: And it must have been nice to use different medium actually [?? 0:26:02]. And to use your German.

Respondent: Eventually I got a very good dinner out of it because-

Interviewer: [Laughter] Good.

Respondent: Some time in 1992 I went to Rome and I said, and I emailed Father [Bleming 0:26:18] and said "I'd like to look at the [?? 0:26.20]" And he said "Well, come to the office, meet the staff and then we'll go out for a meal together. So he took me to a very nice Italian restaurant fairly near their offices. Do you know Rome?"

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Well a lot of those things, which are not in the Vatican itself, are at least in the neighbourhood, in the [?? 0:26:50] and that sort of thing. And I don't know, he was discussing with the waitress something. And because I was interested in the particular dish or something, I joined the conversation. And he then looked at me

and said well he didn't realise you spoke Italian. I said "Well I write it badly but I speak it fluently."

Interviewer: So did you then get asked after that to do anything in Italian or-

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: Did you do any further broadcasts in German afterwards?

Respondent: It tailed off. Because another interesting experience, which could not have been foreseen when I was a child. Equally what I couldn't have foreseen is when eventually for my work with the Catholic Union in England, nothing to do with the Kathpress, I was made a knight of the Papal Order of Saint Gregory. Colonel [Shinbon 0:28:00] in Vienna saw it in the Kathpress, which I thought was very nice of him, wrote to me a letter of congratulation, which I've actually kept. Which is not only handwritten but even the envelope is handwritten. On which there hangs an anecdote.

When I told that particular story to Andrew Summerskill, [?? 0:28:28] Andrew Summerskill, who was Secretary of the Bishops' Conference, the Catholic Bishops' Conference in London but has now from long last been released from this and has gone back to his native Yorkshire to be a parish priest which he always wanted to be. When I told him this story he smiled and said "This is not the copula story." He said "But there's something rather similar."

When the Queen, about two or three years ago, in her Christmas broadcast, made a very specifically Christian thing, I don't know if you'd noticed that, probably you haven't heard that broadcast. About the importance of Christmas and the religious feast and recollection and things. [?? 0:29:21] was so touched by this that he wrote to her to thank her for this. And she wrote back to him to thank him for his letter. And then he was amused to see that not only was the letter handwritten but the envelope had been addressed in the Queen's own handwriting, which was a nice touch.

Interviewer: What a lovely touch, yes, very sensitive. Those little things mean a lot.

Male: And we'll rejoin Hilary Smith talking to Frank Steiner in the next episode of Deddington Discussions.

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