

1.7.

SYLVIA JACOBS 144 Spinningwheel Mead Harlow. 17/10/84

Side A 0-600 cassette
Tape I 0-330 reel to reel
Tape II 0-325

SYLVIA:

Tape I
reel to reel

[It was about 1942, when I really came into the rest centres. I wanted to do something helping people, I could never have joined any of the forces and I think in some respects I saw more action that way than I would have done if I'd been sent to some remote quarters of England to be a typist in some R.A.F. office. At that time the rest centres were all run by the old Poor Law department of the London County Council. I was in what was called Area 6, which was Hammersmith, Kensington, Paddington and Chelsea. The idea was to have places where the people who had been bombed out of their homes could go to immediately, before they went back to their own homes, or had to be found alternative accommodation, or people who actually had to leave the town altogether. At the very beginning of the war there was an idea that there wouldn't be this necessity. They seemed to assume that everybody would be killed. And we were told very early on, when I joined the rest centre service, that the London County Council had provided hundreds and hundreds of papier mache coffins for the remains of people, but they had not provided for people who would be alive. And it was only after the big blitz and the fire of London, they realized there were actual survivors. So they took over the council schools to be run purely for this, although during the day and during the time there wasn't any bombing the children were there. I first of all joined just as a general assistant, which was a sort of a washer upper and cleaner upper and so on and graduated to being a welfare advisor. Now the staff at the rest centres consisted of a manager, I can't remember what his proper title was, or her proper title, a deputy manager, two welfare advisors, who alternated and then the general assistants who helped to provide the meals and clean up and do odd jobs. Now the hours were 24 hours on and 24 hours off and when there wasn't any population, that is bombed out population in the centre, you could have a few hours sleep

SYLVIA:

JACOBS

during that time. But you had to be sitting up and fire watching. The things we used to do while there were no population there was mainly to do with meals and feeding the children. And I was very fascinated by this aspect of work, because I got to know so much about children. One centre I was in in Hammersmith we had a service there, which was a complete service for the children. It meant they came, they had their breakfast with us in the morning, then had their school then they had their school dinner, after that they had tea and play before their parents, usually the mother collected them about 8 o'clock and took them home, so that children from quite a young age 6, or 7, were in the school the whole day. And again I learnt a lot from that. Now when the bombing was on there was, what they called "the little blitz" and it lasted for a few weeks and quite a lot of people were bombed out of their homes and I was working at Kensington at that time and I remember particularly when an old people's home was bombed out. It was run by a Catholic society and what was so upsetting about it was that it was full of old men and they'd never been so happy in their lives as when they were bombed out, because they had a freer life and lovely meals and one man who was the "head boy" we called him, he always used to make a speech to the cook, she had to come in and be congratulated on her meals. And we had to train them, while they were there not to always make their beds and pack everything up at night, which they'd been forced to do. And we all bid them farewell very sadly, when they had to go back to the convent. That was the small blitz, I remember one night at Barbie Rd. in Kensington, when the bombing was on and I and a mentally handicapped young assistant, who was there, were wandering around the playground looking for fire bombs and the manager of the centre, came to us in an absolute rage "What are you doing, you and Tommy" - Tommy Styles - and we said we're looking for fire bombs and he said "You're absolutely mad" and we said "well we've got our helmets on". And next morning he came in and brought in the stuff that had been flying around. He said that's what's was flying around the playground, when you two were looking for fire bombs. We just grinned from ear to

SYLVIA:

ear, because we were both so used to it by that time. The big thing was when the V1's and the V2's came. That was the flying bomb and the first night it happened, I was working then in Paddington in a rest centre there called Beethoven Street, all the streets in that area were called after.... Beethoven Street, Mozart Street and so on. And we just did not know what was happening. The air raid warning went. "e heard nothing - we didn't hear any anti aircraft, we didn't hear any bombs and the warning stayed on all night and the procedure was - you had to ring the district office every quarter of an hour - Beethoven Street "nothing to report" - or if there had been anything "Beethoven Street a hundred people had been brought in bombed out" and they said we don't know what's happening, we have no idea what's happening and then in the morning we got the news that these flying bombs were coming over and some of them had been interceded before they actually got to London. I went home to my little dive and about the middle of the afternoon they came to me and said you know, that things were really happening and would I go off to Lewisham to a centre there, which was right out of my district and the people were coming in absolutely bemused because they'd no ideawhat was happening. And then we began to see them coming over and I used to go off duty and go to bed to rest, because having been on 24 hours, and I'd hear one of these things come over I'd get out of my bed open the door and stand on the landing, while it went over hear it drop and then go back to bed again. Its just interesting to me now, when I think about what's going on in Belfast ~~now~~ and realizing how easy it is to adjust to the continuous bombing. I remember a friend of my brother's, who I became quite friendly with, in the R.A.F and he'd been a prsioner of war in Italy and he was taking me out one night - an air raid warning went and he said "what do we do now?" and I said "what do you mean, I thought we were going out to dinner!" And he said "Oh, God, you Londoners, I don't understand you at all" It is how you canadjust to totally impossible situations.

The job of the welfare advisor was firstly to receive people coming in and possibly to concentrate a bit on the flying

SYLVIA: p.4

bomb people. I mean some of them were just carried in in blankets. They'd lost their clothes and were absolutely black from the dust and the sort of tragedies you were often faced with - I remember one man and his son - the son was home from the army - and the man had had a quarrel with his wife, he'd gone down into the shelter, but she'd stayed in the house and been killed. You were involved in recording them coming in, finding out whether there was anywhere for them to go - sending them to the appropriate places for getting clothing, for getting money, for getting rehousing or whatever. A lot of houses were what was called requisitioned so that people who had lost their home could be found alternative accommodation, in their own district. Or if that was impossible perhaps being sent out of London. So there was that side of it and just pure comforting to do. Listening to people's troubles and so on. I used to find in the evenings, with people coming home from work or their rounds of all the authorities they'd just come and sit and talk. So you'd spend say - from about six o'clock in the evening till twelve o'clock at night talking to people. Another case I remember very specially was the little boy, who was brought in with his mother, they had been in a shelter, at the same time, a woman came in and a child was missing and they had to chase round three hospitals and he hadn't been hurt, so he joined her. And one afternoon these two ladies went off to do their rounds and I was left in charge of the two of them and they were about 5 and 6 years old and they played the entire afternoon "the air raid warning" One would do the sound and the other would go and hide and then he'd give the all clear and he'd come out and there were peels of laughter. The residents in the centre were going absolutely mad. "Can't you stop them?" I knew very little at that time, but I knew it was something they had to work through. And they played this for an afternoon and then it was over. And some way they'd sorted out ~~everything~~ *their feelings*.

Q. How long did people stay in rest centres?

They'd stay as long as it took. But they weren't in more than a few weeks. I remember another case. A remarkable little woman - she was about 4ft.10in. with her invalid husband dying of parkinsons a very sickly sister and a very sweet little girl of 7

had been bombed out of their house. and she came to me one day and she said "Isn't it marvellous there's a requisitioned house in Riverside Walk, we'd always longed to live there, wouldn't it be wonderful if my husband could be there, where he's always longed to live" I asked "Are they offering it to you?" "Yes they are." So that was it. So then someone thought better of it, because it was rather an upper class area and they didn't want her to go and they said that it would take a long time so they'd better offer her something else. So I said "You can stay here until that place is ready, no question about it" So she did and then she moved in and then she told me that one of the neighbours was being extremely objectionable to her and so we got working on that and in the end he was asking protection from this 4ft 10in woman. I enjoyed that family very much and they did settle there. I don't know what happened after that, but he obviously ended his days where he'd always wanted to be. Some of the very sad ones were the elderly people who came in. We got to know them quite intimately in a very short space of time. There were two wonderful sisters, who had spent their lives looking after other people's children - they were foster mothers - and they came in with a man, who had stayed with them from childhood and then one evening a girl came running into the centre asking "were they alright?" And she told me that they'd fostered her. I found that they'd come from Shropshire, a county I'm very fond of, and I asked if they'd been back and they said "No" they'd come to London 40 years ago, but of course they'd never been able to afford to go back. And when the whole group of older people were going away into the country, they were waiting for the bus to come for them to take them away, and so we had a bit of a sing song and one of the two old ladies came to me - I almost cry to talk about it - she said "Will you ask the lady to play "We have a friend in Jesus" because he's been so good to us." Well they've been good to people I don't know about anything else and one of them was quite an invalid by that time. There was a woman who came in with her common law husband and two nights later her husband came in, he'd been

17/10/84

bombed out of a neighbouring street. And it could have been a bit embarrassing, but being London in the Blitz, they all went out to the pub together and had a drink.

Q. Did people sleep in dormitories?

They slept on bunk beds, in the actual classrooms.

Q. Did you have mixed men/women if they were married?

Yes they did. And I slept in my little office. One night during the fire bomb episode I had to go to three different rest centres. They came and collected me. I took in about 100 people in one and then I moved on to another and then they came for me at about seven o'clock in the morning to take me on somewhere else. And I remember the officer, who brought me along, he looked at me quite accusingly "He said "You look tired"] I had been working for twenty-four hours and I said no, no I wasn't tired.

*end of
Reel II* [The actual rest centres where people were brought were most unsafe. They had been built up, so that the lower part of them was bricks outside and so the idea was that when the bombs were falling, you went from the main hall into the side places and the weird thing was that people felt safe in the, because of the people there. And quite often when people found their own homes again, or found new homes, they'd come back in the evening to the centre because that's where they felt safe. I remember one old man, who was very very lame and we'd send him into the side rooms, where you were supposed to be safe and as soon as the all clear went, he'd come out again and we were continuously looking around and finding him out and having to help this crippled old man back in again. It was one or two rest centres that were bombed and several people killed and one of the nurses were killed. That reminds me, you always have a nurse on duty as well, they were quite often quite elderly nurses, who had done their training and perhaps even retired. So we had nurses on who were able to do ~~sort-of~~ first aid.

Q. What did you get paid

we got paid £2/10- per week, which sounds ridiculous now but it didn't seem too bad. What we also had was a subsistence allowance of 3/- a day. But when you had population in the centre, you lost your subsistence allowance, because it was assumed in any case you'd eat what was provided for the

population. The great saying was "Use it as you would indoors" So if you've got butter or margarine or something you must'nt use it because it was free and the good old Cockney expression "indoors" meaning at home. You'd use it as you would indoors they'd say slapping on as much as they could get. There was rest centre supper, for when we didn't have ~~people~~ ^{population} in which was mainly bread and marge. But there was something else people had on bread, which was condensed milk. Lots of people lived on condensed milk in those days. They'd have condensed milk rather than evaporated or anything else. It was a part of the diet. Later on they wanted people to take on duties in what they called the rest homes. for aged and infirm people that had been bombed out and they wanted a deputy superintendant and I applied for the job. I decided that there was more to learn from that I suppose. There weren't somany flying bombs. There was the Vll which we didn't have so many of now, so that's what I moved into. I do remember once, it was very weird that the Vll because you didn't hear it until it had dropped, and I remember talking to somebody and hearing at the other end of the telephone the noise of the Vll and they heard it after me. I can't explain it the noise was so peculiar. Anyway, I went to a rest home in Stoke Newington and we had 36 old people - men and women - they were separated the men and women, but we had a marriage and we had a couple there. Everybody used to say then - if you have any romances brewing nip them in the bud, because this couple were the biggest nuisance I ever met in my life. Our oldest inhabitant was a man of 95, who had been an old army sergeant - an old rogue and absolute darling - but my favourite was the poor old man who was German. He'd served 40 years in the Merchant Service and been married to an Irish woman, but when the old men felt bored their idea was to tease the German. So when I used to go round to get them to sign for their pensions, because I had to collect their pensions, he sometimes used to say "No, no, not me Fraulein, not me, I'm German I must'nt have it." And then I used to turn round and say "I never want to hear anybody say anything like this again. You

SYLVIA: p. 8 17/10/84

You served 40 years in the Merchant Service for England and you deserve it as much as anybody." And then the old men would all shuffle and look self conscience. The women used to be knitting and crocheting for their grandchildren and the old men used ^{to} sit and argue. The only thing that bothered me was every Sunday 35 "News of the Worlds" came into the house and they all sat down together to read their papers and the only old man who took "Rendell's ~~News~~ News" was my old German. "Rendell's News" was, of course, a very left wing Sunday newspaper. One time the cook's husband was blown up in an explosion and the superintendant was away. I was on my own with two nurses and one assistant and I had to take over the cooking. Fortunately we had a marvellous old woman called Nanny Donville she'd been a nurse, a children's nanny and she always used to listen at doors to find out what was going on and spread it to everybody. This occasion it was very worthwhile because she told everybody and in a very short space of time I had four volunteers for the kitchen, so we all worked together and they all loved it. That was another experience I learnt a lot from, because everybody came to me that day and said what a lovely dinner it was, because they'd taken part in it.

Q. What were people's attitudes towards you when they came into rest centers

They were extremely warm and extremely friendly. It is true there was a spirit during the blitz. I mean it doesn't alleviate the conditions really of the suffering of people but on the whole people got on extremely well. I always remember we had four Irish labourers in because they kept coming over here to do work and they came up to me afterwards and they said "You don't belong to London do you?" I said well no I was born in the country and they said "We knew that you've got so much patience." We used to have tremendous talks and as I've said before, within a very short space of time we got on very intimate terms with people, who used to tell me everything. You'd get involved in doing things. There was one man, he was applying for a job - I think he was very able at his job, but he was very bad at writing and I helped him to write his application. You'd get involved in almost anything.

Q. Looking back on it what do you think about the Second World war?

SYLVIA: p.9 17/10/84

Well, I'm very mixed, very confused. I was young when it broke out. I always had pacifist views. I didn't belong to the Peace Pledge Union, but I definitely was determined that I wouldn't do anything to kill people. My time during the war would be to try and help people, who were suffering from it. I did apply to do nursing but I didn't pass the medical. At that time I had a slight goitre and slight hypothyroidism and so I couldn't get in. I was very glad to be in rest centres. The rest centre experience was the best thing for me and, of course, led eventually to a career as a social worker. I think I was confused about the war, I thought it should have been avoided at the beginning. Sometimes I think it could have been with less suffering. I don't know - we'll never know the real history. There were ideas actually, I didn't believe all the stories, I have to admit, about what was going on in Germany at the time. And I think a lot of people didn't know just how bad things were.

Q. Did you mean with the Jews?

Yes. I sometimes wonder whether the Jews would have suffered less, if there hadn't been a war, than they did with the war. Because once the war was on, then nobody could save them, whereas before they were coming out of Germany.

Subsequently, thinking after the event, there were positive ideas of assassinating Hitler and there were also positive ideas after the beginning of the war, when some sort of deal could have been made. But there's a peculiar attitude that it's better to fight a war and kill ~~and~~ millions of people than to go and assassinate two or three people. I suppose I'm not a complete pacifist, because I would have thought that some sort of deal could have been made.

Of course, things were confused in the war because there was the Soviet German Pact. It was only later on the Russians came into the war. I think a lot of Communist people were confused, because at one time they opposed the war and then they had to change over.

Q Do you think the Second World War helped the women's movement? I don't know. It's very difficult to say. The young people who volunteered first of all and then the young people who were conscripted I think it was a marvellous thing for them getting away from home,

SYLVIA: p.10 17/10/84

who were stuck in very dreary very dull jobs, or particularly perhaps in the upper middle class families where the daughter at home had to stick at home, until she'd married. It did open up tremendous opportunities for women in that way. I think one can look upon it perhaps too much from a class point of view. I think it probably benefitted the upper classes. As somebody said to a friend of mine, who was lecturing to two women's guilds - he was talking about women going out to work and not going out to work - ^{but} and these women looked at him in utter amazement and they said "We've always gone out to work. We had to, we couldn't have kept our families without."

I think we forget about those women. They were doing dreary jobs, terrible pay, but they'd always assumed that they had to work. It's not a simple question at all. I cannot remember the name of the lady who started creches, but it was then considered much more respectable for women to leave their children to be looked after and I mentioned earlier on about the children who stayed all day with me and they didn't seem to suffer very much - As long as they had a home--.

Q. At the end of the war were women forced to go back into the home, or did they volunteer?

They weren't forced to go back.- I think it's happening now.- but not immediately after the war, because one has to remember that immediately after the war, anybody could get a job. My end of the war was hospital - I was carried out feet first from my rest home for old people and taken to Hackney Hospital, where I spent seven weeks, with chest trouble and then had to go down to a special unit in the country. I was a year off work. When I came back to work, I was working with mentally handicapped people and I could find jobs for the people, who nobody would look at now, because there were jobs everywhere. Even later, when Enoch Powell was bringing over the people from the Caribbean and Africa and so on to work in the hospitals, because there was a shortage of work. There wasn't a question of unemployment then. There was a shortage of workers. That lasted for quite a long time, when ^{women} ~~we~~ could get work. Now you mention it - there was emancipation in the rest centres. And that was women who were craving for an education, meeting in groups with educated people, who they'd never had the chance of working with before. - and talking to them

SYLVIA: 17/10/84 p.11

and getting to know them. There were linkages between the older men, possibly of fairly advanced views and young women, who were working and talking and learning. And they were really feeling themselves of some importance and worth.

It was more than just doing the work, but feeling that they had a worth in their own right. A lot of them had their husbands away for years. That's another thing one has to remember. I remember when I started social work again, people whose children hadn't seen their fathers, until they were five years old. And having to get used to father.

Those women had had to be very independent indeed. Bringing up their families on their own, and under difficult circumstances. End
Red it

Q. Were you aware of illegitimate children being born?

You were certainly aware of it and "the little Americans" being born, that was the thing everybody was excited about.

I don't think it mattered so much if they were English!

Especially if they were black children! You know the famous saying, which one always said about the Americans.

The three things wrong with them: OVER*SEXED, OVER PAID and OVER HERE. They were resented very much, because they always had more money and always got the first chance of the girls. And quite a lot married and went back, but there were quite a lot of children born to Americans.

Q. Do you think the attitude of sex before marriage altered thanks to the war?

Yes, I think so, because I always think it does in a war.

In a way its not particularly elevating for the woman, because she's considered to be doing a bit of a service to the men - "our boys". They need a bit of sex, so its O.K. I think that's an attitude. It didn't make their position any better, but they were frowned on less than

they would have been at other times. One of the jobs I had before working in rest centres was working in the West End of London and I always remember the prostitutes out.

Younger people don't see this at all now because under the new acts - they're not on the streets now. They're more in their own places. But to walk along Piccadilly at night all the way along were some very well dressed prostitutes. They were out every night. I used to meet them. I almost greeted them in the evening, at times. I remember once waiting for somebody and they thought I was stealing her pitch!

SYLVIA: 17/10/84 p. 12

It was considered so acceptable then. There was a place called the "Universal Brasserie" right at Picadilly Circus. It was a very popular place to go because it was very cheap, but it got to be known as the "Universal Brothel." And I was once refused entry, although I was waiting for a friend down there, because I was on my own. And every now and then there was an attempt to try to deal with this. But not very successfully. I think that venereal disease became much more prevalent.

Q. What about contraception, did that become available during the war?

The male contraceptives were on sale everywhere and there were all sorts of old fashioned remedies, but I don't think you could get ready advice, excepting for the Marie Stopes clinics, which were open. The sort of advice people can get now, was non-existent.

Q. What about trying to get abortions?

Abortions were illegal. But of course masses of people got illegal abortions. And very dangerous indeed it was. They used to find the dead babies bodies down the sewers. They still do actually. Certainly abortions were absolutely frowned on at that time. With all the people being killed it could be considered to have a baby at that time.

Q. Did men's attitudes to women and work alter during the war? Not very ostensibly. They still thought it was alright for women to work, as long as they didn't take the better jobs.. They would accept a woman who was a secretary or typist, but they weren't really keen on someone who was a head of department or something.

Q. What about the unions?

I can't really answer that. I didn't join the union till much later. That was after the war. I joined N.U.P.E because the London County Council then only had a staff association, which I wouldn't join because it wasn't affiliated to the T.U.C.

Q. What do you remember most about the war?

I remember always being slightly at odds with what was going on. I could never join in the sort of jingoistic attitude towards it. I always found it a saddening thing. Possibly my Mother had a lot of influence on me in this, because

SYLVIA: 17/10/84 p.13

she was a person who was very - irreverent - and her father had been extraordinary and had been shouted at for being pro Boar war and he was anti it. We were anti every war that came up. She was not in favour of the first world war. The Second world war came along and I feel the same, although I did have two brothers serving in really frontline work in the R.A.F. - both bomber pilots.

Q. What were your politics?

They were very confused. I can only say that. They weren't even Left and they weren't Conservative. They were mixed. I was mainly concerned about war than anything else.

Q. Is there anything about the war you specifically remember?

~~There's one incident, I think it would have to be on a film~~

Something that could be put on stage?

There's one incident I think it would have to be on a film, I've never forgotten and I've puzzled over because I've never heard it spoken of since.

I was travelling out of London on a bus, and behind me, there were not many people on the bus, and behind me were two young men talking. They weren't in uniform, but they spoke as if they were soldiers. They were talking about Dunkirk and they said "Yes, everybody talks about Dunkirk, but what about Bordeaux? And what happened at Bordeaux" You see a lot of our men came off from there, not from Dunkirk at all. What happened then was they'd been so betrayed by their officers, that not many officers came back, because the men shot them. I was really quite frightened. I hardly dare repeat this conversation to anybody, because I thought if I'm caught spreading this, not only am I spreading alarm and despondency, but almost rebellion. I still haven't read anything or heard anything of what did happen at Bordeaux. And I can still see those young men. I went into a shell and listened, without them really realizing. They were so absorbed in their conversation. That stands out in my mind. Possibly because its an unresolved mystery. But it was frightening to have heard this said.