

Remember your humanity

Pamela Wood

In July 1962 I was working as a temporary secretary and feeling rather bored. My sister, Shirley Foster, who was a member of the Committee of 100, told me a group of young people who were working for Bertrand Russell were in need of temporary assistance and asked if I was interested. I was, very much so, since I was a great admirer of Lord Russell and had been on numerous anti-nuclear demonstrations – both CND marches and direct action organised by the Committee of 100. So I started to work at 28 Hasker Street, Chelsea, a small house near the one Lord and Lady Russell lived in when they visited London. People working in Hasker Street at the time included Alastair Yule, Ralph Schoenman, Pat Pottle, Nic Johnson and Tom Kinsey. Chris Farley joined the group shortly afterwards. All of them had been involved in the anti-nuclear movement.

The setting up of the Committee of 100 had been an idea suggested to Bertrand Russell by Ralph Schoenman, but by the time I came on the scene preparations were under way to establish a Peace Foundation under Lord Russell's name. So I found myself typing letters for Lord Russell's signature to various eminent people, asking for support for the proposed Foundation. Having joined the team in 1962, it was nine years before I left to do other things, and the Russell Foundation developed in many different ways in those years.

Our place of work moved from Hasker Street to Argyll Mansions, a flat on King's Road, Chelsea and finally to Shavers Place, a small office just off the Haymarket. People came and went but for much of the time I worked for the Foundation Ralph

Pamela Wood shares her memories of working at the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation during the 1960s.

Schoenman and Chris Farley were Lord Russell's main secretaries. They made frequent visits to his home in North Wales and, acting on his instructions, would draft letters and articles on his behalf as well as conducting the business of the Foundation generally. Packages of papers, including letters for signature, were regularly sent to North Wales by train or posted from a central London post office.

Lord Russell was well known and respected internationally and received communications from all corners of the globe. He gave support to people campaigning for nuclear disarmament, to others who were suffering various forms of discrimination, and to those who were seeking his intervention on behalf of political prisoners. The Commonwealth Heads of Government met in London on a regular basis and he often came to his house in Haker Street at that time in order to meet leading political figures. If Lord Russell's politics did not find favour with the British or American Governments of the time, the heads of many non-aligned countries were much more open to his views.

One of the first major political events which occurred even before the Foundation was officially set up was the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember helping to alert the Press to the content of Lord Russell's telegrams to Kennedy and Khrushchev and the replies he received. It was often my job in subsequent years to phone Press organisations and give out statements on behalf of Lord Russell and the Foundation. Inevitably, the British Press was generally hostile. Lord Russell did, of course, describe what took place concerning Cuba in his book *Unarmed Victory*, which also deals with his attempts to mediate between India and China over their border dispute.

Preparations for setting up the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation were made during the Spring and Summer of 1963 and, as far as I was concerned, these included my typing letters for Lord Russell's signature asking people to act as sponsors. Then, in September, the Press was told of plans to set up both the BRPF and a charitable organisation, the Atlantic Peace Foundation.

A sale of works of art donated to the Foundation was organised at Woburn Abbey as part of an early attempt to raise funds. Indeed, during most of the time I worked for the BRPF money raising was a constant problem and we were often running very low on cash. Money was obviously needed to run an office, to pay permanent members of staff, to cover the costs of printing various publications, and for travel expenses when Lord Russell's representatives travelled abroad. Among many generous donations were paintings by Picasso and Miro. These were, for

a while, kept in the Shavers Place office – something which I now acknowledge as rather foolhardy. Had anyone known of their presence it would not have been difficult to stage a break-in.

One of the earliest events to be organised by the Foundation was a conference on political prisoners in Iraq, held in a London hotel in February 1965. I remember that one of the participants was Ethel Mannin, the socialist and novelist who had known Lord Russell for many years. Khalid Zaki, a young Iraqi and political refugee who had campaigned against his government, worked at Shavers Place for a while and shared his knowledge of Middle Eastern politics. He was later joined by his brother, Mustapha. Khalid eventually returned to Iraq and was tragically killed by the Iraqi authorities.

While I was at the Foundation a number of people acted as Lord Russell's secretaries or directors of the organisation. They were all bright, capable young men. Many women also worked for the Foundation but, for the most part, in supporting roles – typing letters, articles and Press statements, duplicating material, making phone calls, etc. Some of them were bright, capable young women, but this was the 1960s, before the second wave of feminism really took off. Among the people who worked in the Shavers Place office was a young woman called Janet (whose surname escapes me) who, I believe, was recruited through an employment agency. She was an efficient and conscientious worker but, I think, a little bemused by the whole set-up. Other women who worked from time to time in the office (and who were, perhaps, more committed to its aims) included Sarah Russell (Lord Russell's granddaughter), Edith Schoenman (Ralph's sister), Paula Howard (nee Coleman) and Diane Nair.

Shavers Place was a rather scruffy building – not particularly impressive for foreign visitors. The office was kept as clean as possible by two cleaners, Mrs Payne and her daughter, who worked with us for several years. I doubt it was particularly easy to clean their way around my vertical heap filing system, which was a constant presence on my desk. Unfortunately, every time I tried to lessen its size I was asked to do something 'more important'.

Although Lord Russell and those working with him remained concerned about the danger of nuclear war and the spread of nuclear weapons, the Foundation got involved with many other issues of the day. In November 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated and some time later an American lawyer, Mark Lane, had a meeting with Lord Russell and detailed some of his concerns about flaws in the investigation into the President's death. The Who Killed Kennedy? Committee was set up with

headquarters in Shavers Place and Lord Russell and other people associated with the Foundation wrote letters and articles on the subject.

The flat in Argyll Mansions was still in the possession of the Foundation and was often used to accommodate people visiting London. These included Mark Lane and his wife, Anneliese, and his American researcher, Mike Lester. The latter lived in Argyll Mansions for some weeks and spent his time painstakingly analysing what was known about the assassination and going through the Warren Commission Report in meticulous detail. Lord Russell issued a statement when the Report was published, criticising its inadequacies. He was, of course, taken to task for this by much of the Press but one could argue that questions concerning the assassination still need to be answered.

Some of the early Directors of the Foundation resigned after a time. These included Pat Pottle, Charles Ellis and Tom Kinsey. Several people connected with the *New Left Review* were involved for some time. These included Robin Blackburn, Perry Anderson, Alex Cockburn and Fei Ling Davis.

There was quite a spread of views and political affiliations among the people who were drawn into the Foundation's ambit. Sometimes relationships could become explosive and, as with many political organisations, there were clashes of ego, walk-outs and splits.

Among the people who joined in the mid-sixties was Ken Coates, an academic from Nottingham who was involved in the workers' control movement. Although he remained based in Nottingham, he brought with him political contacts such as Pat Jordan and Geoff Coggan, who moved down to London for a time, and, later, Ken Fleet. The two Kens were to remain with the Foundation on a long-term basis.

As the sixties progressed the war in Vietnam began to escalate and Lord Russell increasingly turned his attention in that direction. Articles in the Press and visits to Vietnam made by people connected with the Foundation made clear the suffering of the Vietnamese and the idea of setting up an International War Crimes Tribunal to investigate what had been happening in that country took shape. Large numbers of people in the United States had for some time been campaigning against their Government's policies in Vietnam and, as plans for a Tribunal developed, a number of young Americans came to London to assist in our work. These included Deirdre Griswold and Maryann Weissman from Youth Against War and Fascism, Ernie Tate, and Russell and Susan Stetler. Lord Russell persuaded a number of eminent figures to participate in the Tribunal and the first session was held in London in November 1966. Isaac Deutscher took a

major part in the setting up of the Tribunal but unfortunately died in 1967. I have some rather vague memories of the initial session in London and of the formidable presence of both Sartre and de Beauvoir.

For most of the time I worked for the Foundation I was London based, although I did make a few visits to Plas Penrhyn, the Russells' Welsh home. Lord and Lady Russell were very hospitable and I remember afternoon teas, which involved consumption of Red Hackle whisky, as well as the relating of many amusing anecdotes by Lord Russell, often referring back to incidents in his very long life. On one visit to Wales I spent time with Lucy Russell and we became friendly. Lucy was a lovely young woman – intelligent and warm, with a very lively mind. I was very sad, some years later, when I heard of her suicide. For a while, Lucy and her boyfriend moved into a flat I was renting in Hampstead. Unfortunately, we had problems with our landlady and had to move out. So, in 1965 I moved into Argyll Mansions. This meant I grew acquainted with many of the people who stayed there. The kitchen contained a very old electric stove and attempts were made to cook many international dishes on it as people from different countries passed through or stayed for a while.

Among the people who lived in Argyll Mansions were the Stetlers. They first visited in 1966 and returned in 1967 together with their baby son. Morgan was a much-travelled baby during his first year or so. Having got to know the Stetlers, I was impressed with their grasp of international politics. They seemed to be conversant not only with the situation in South East Asia but also had a good deal of knowledge about Latin America. Looking back, I realise a number of the people connected with the Foundation were exceptionally mature and responsible, considering their youth. Being close in age, I was less aware of this at the time, but now that I am pretty ancient I find it more remarkable. I think it reflects well on Lord Russell that, despite his age, he was so interested in what was happening in the world and willing to work with people who were so much his junior. What he brought to the table, of course, was an incredible intellect and a lifetime of experience.

The War Crimes Tribunal developed apace and the Foundation acquired new office space in Rivington Street, East London to house extra people. I never worked in that building and have no clear idea of what the people working there were doing. I do remember that preparations for the Stockholm sessions of the Tribunal were made in both London and Paris. I travelled to Stockholm in 1967 and remember being very moved by the accounts of bombing raids and the subsequent suffering of many

Vietnamese witnesses.

As well as preparing for the Tribunal, people at the Foundation helped set up the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign involving, amongst others, Tariq Ali. There were numbers of demonstrations in the UK against the US involvement in Vietnam in which the VSC participated.

The Tribunal held another session in Roskilde, Denmark, later in 1967 and, in 1968, the Rivington Street office was closed and the numbers of people working for the Foundation diminished. Also in 1968 Ralph Schoenman was barred from entering the UK and he began to work from a New York office. It was probably inevitable that the other Directors of the Foundation at that time decided they could no longer work with him. Lord Russell's own assessment of Ralph's character was published after the former's death in February 1970.

Ken Blackwell, a young Canadian researcher, appeared on the scene in 1966 and eventually he was to put in charge of the Russell Archive, when it was sold to McMaster University of Hamilton, Ontario. Some of the money from this sale made its way into the Foundation's coffers.

After Lord Russell's death the headquarters of the Foundation moved to Nottingham and Shavers Place was vacated. Ownership of the flat at Argyll Mansions had already been given up. I went to work elsewhere early in 1971. By this time Chris Farley and Ken Coates were the principal Directors. Chris was a Director of the Foundation during all the time I worked for it. I was always impressed by what he wrote and aware that he was very careful about backing up his assertions. He was a quiet man but he had a great sense of humour and could be very good company. As for the two Kens, I thought when the Foundation moved to Nottingham it was in very good hands.

I learned a good deal about international politics during the time when I worked for Lord Russell and for the Foundation. I think this has made me less parochial in my attitudes than I might otherwise have been. I wonder how Bertrand Russell would have viewed the world in the twenty-first century. I suspect he would still have been concerned about the spread of nuclear weapons and would also be worried about climate change. Of all the things he wrote, one request he made has remained with me: 'Remember your humanity and forget the rest'.