

Chapter 2

Oxford, Party, Mosely meeting

1935–1936



1935

In 1935 I went up to St Hughs in early October to read Mathematics on an education grant. I had always wanted to be a teacher. How Peter coped with Peggy's absence and the fact that she and Arthur were both together in London, I don't know. She *did* visit him. That autumn there was a local election in Oxford and, as a loyal member of the Labour Party, I was helping out in one of the committee rooms – folding leaflets. Peter and Peggy swept in looking incredibly glamorous – much of a height it seemed – Peter with a shock of blue-black hair – Peggy a mass of glowing red hair piled high. They glanced round the room at us lesser mortals, asked if we were all right – and swept out again. I was dazzled.

One afternoon when I was drinking coffee in the Labour Club coffee rooms someone dashed in saying “Peter Hewett has had an accident on his bike!”, but as I was not then aware of which Peter was which, I was not unduly worried.

It seemed to me that as I had attended an all girls' school and known mainly younger boys, my brothers' friends, I ought to find out what made men tick. The best way to do this, I thought, would be to accept any invitation to tea I was offered – after all, tea is a relatively safe meal and one can escape early. So, nearly every day I took tea with a male student. If he turned out to be as neurotic or boring as I suspected, I thanked him but must be back at St Hughs almost at once. If, rarely, he proved able to talk about something other than himself, I might stay a little longer, but we had to be back in college by 7 pm when the doors were shut – and anyway I needed to be in college for dinner. In those days I hadn't really learnt to talk much, but was a very good listener.

One student I found interesting was Andrew Filson. He had been a member of the University Communist Party but had defected and felt free to tell me a great deal about it, in particular about the underground members who kept their membership very secret. This got back to Peter and his comrades. I had been an object of suspicion from the first as my father had been a leading light in a conference in Oxford that summer and had taken a firmly anti-Communist stance. Our unusual surname, Spikes, made it inevitable that our relationship was noticed.

Then, at St Hughs, one of my friends, Ruth Kaye, said that she had been thinking of becoming a Communist but didn't know how to set about it.

“Don't worry” I said. “I can get a message to them”. So I did.

From then on most of the daily party meetings seem to have been concerned with “What to do about Diana Spikes?” After a lot of consideration they decided I would be safer in than out.

Bernard Flood, son of the High Commissioner of Canada and a very beautiful young man, was deputed to approach me. I had, in

fact, already decided that this would be the next step for me, as no-one else, not even the Labour Party, seemed to be taking Hitler seriously. But I let Bernard take me for a long walk round Oxford to try to persuade me into agreeing to join. Actually, although tall and beautiful he was a very proper young man who would not ride a bike for fear of spoiling the crease in his trousers, so my eventual agreement had nothing to do with his charm.

I was asked to go to Peter Hewett's rooms in Peck Quad in Christchurch at four o'clock next day. I was playing in a netball match that afternoon and certainly had no time to go back and change my clothes, so I turned up, rather out of breath and glowing with health in my netball tunic.

There they were – half a dozen young men – lying back in armchairs, their long legs stretched out in front of them – and the most important was Peter.

“Would I join the Communist Party?” “It was a very serious matter, not to be taken lightly.” “It could be dangerous.” “Was I prepared to be shot for my beliefs?” “Was I prepared to work for the Party?” Finally I was admitted, on probation, subject to my attending weekly political education meetings and doing some research into political opinions in St Hughs. By the end of term there were four of us in college, Ruth Kaye, Sonia Mandlecorn, Peggy Tubb and myself.

We all decided to attend a Labour Club Saturday Hop in a church hall near Ruskin, the Trade Union College. Peter was there, looking important but not dancing. Sonia and I both fancied him and when a Ladies' Excuse Me was announced Sonia said, “Bet you a shilling to the Daily Worker Fighting Fund I dance with Peter Hewett first” and we both started off decorously across the hall; but Sonia was waylaid by a small Jewish comrade so I got there first.

Peter was very reluctant to dance but as I had to win the bet he had very little choice. I think he enjoyed it, as he spent the rest of the evening dancing with me and before the last waltz he had asked me out for dinner the following week. I would not have accepted had I known he had to borrow the money to pay for it.

He was honest, and told me he was still in love with Peggy but didn't know what the future of that relationship would be, and would like to see more of me.

The next day all the important members of the Student Communist Party called on Peter to warn him against me, but of course he didn't tell me this. I was used to men making play for me very early in an acquaintanceship and the fact that Peter did not made him different and more interesting. Peggy wasn't there so I decided to risk a broken heart and see him as often as I could.

He had no money at all – but before term ended we exchanged home addresses and telephone numbers, and I was pleased to find that he lived at Bexleyheath, only a few miles from my home at Blackheath.

After Christmas I invited him to tea. He turned up on my doorstep having cycled over Shooters Hill and refused to come in until I produced some dry tea – “or parsley will do if that is more convenient”. He didn’t at all mind admitting that he had forgotten he was coming to see me and had eaten a large raw onion with his bread and cheese lunch. Raw tea was available and, apparently, if he chewed it the smell of onions would be less noticeable – but as he didn’t kiss me I couldn’t see what all the fuss was about. Having got over that difficulty his visit was a success – my mother certainly seemed to like him.

The following week he rang up and invited me back to meet *his* family – a brave thing to do. They were still in the Bexleyheath house but as they were unable to pay the rent the landlord wouldn’t do any repairs. The floorboards in the kitchen had rotted so we had to walk on the joists. Florence, Peter’s mother, had just had all her teeth out and hadn’t yet got replacements. The bare boards in the entrance hall were dusty and hanging on the wall was a sixpence-in-the-slot cigarette machine – the kind you used to find outside tobacconists: 6d bought 10 Players and they fondly imagined they were saving money.

Out beyond the dangerous kitchen, in the factory, Peter and Bill were working with chisels on an order for 5000 show cards which had been misprinted and cut; the small hole in all the @’s had been omitted.

After tea we played dictionary games around the cleared table, now covered in a plush table covering with tassels – but this was not something in which I was able to shine. Arthur was worried that I didn’t seem to be enjoying myself and suggested a singsong round the piano. Florence played the accompaniment but as she never had time to practice it was punctuated by loud contralto curses when she hit the wrong note. Joan had a high, true soprano voice while Peter and Bill sang seconds. Unfortunately, I am tone deaf, as near as makes no difference, so had to resist Arthur’s coaxing for me to join the group. They must have thought me very stuck up – but I wasn’t – just astonished and inarticulate.

1936

During the Easter term 1936, I got more involved in the Student Communist Party so saw more of Peter Hewett. The Communist group in St Hughs was growing. The Labour Club and the October Club merged and membership rose to 1000 of the 4000 Oxford students.

I was invited to tea by Harold Wilson, whose mother knew my aunt, and we took a walk together – neither of us much impressed

by the other but doing our duty. He told me that he planned to be the next Liberal Prime Minister.

One of Peter's friends at that time was Francois Laffitte, the son of Havelock Ellis' partner. Havelock Ellis was then a famous psychiatrist who wrote widely, from a Freudian point of view I believe, on sex.

Peter was invited back for the weekend. Havelock Ellis was white haired and seemed very old, but impressive. His lady, Madame Lafitte, was much younger, foreign and glamorous – so Peter thought. When they had all retired for the night she came into Peter's bedroom in her negligée and, taking his hand in hers, explained in a seductive voice that she knew he desired her, but although she found him very attractive, she felt that it wouldn't perhaps be fair to Havelock were she to make love to such a young man.

After she had kissed him and left Peter was unable to sleep, so spent the night reading all Havelock's works, on bookshelves in his room.

This adventure had a formative effect on Peter. Thereafter he yearned for attractive women to offer themselves freely for sex without his having to overcome his shyness to make the running. Sadly for him, most females believed then that men didn't like "forward" women.

This made life very difficult for him in later life. He felt that if *offered* sex without strings he must respond – yet as he grew older and women less inhibited and he *was* propositioned it was frequently by women he didn't find attractive. In theory he should have been willing and gratified, in practice he was just embarrassed.

I didn't particularly like Francois. He seemed to me to be very young for his age: he reported with great glee that he had sat next to a girl in the cinema who was wearing a *transparent blouse!*

That was a very political year. Mosely brought his Blackshirts to Oxford and we were unable to prevent him hiring an upstairs hall in Carfax for a meeting – to be ticket only. So we all bought tickets. We knew that the Oxford police were sympathetic to Mosely but that the Oxford bus drivers could be relied on. Town and Gown planned together. We were all asked to buy a copy of the Oxford Mail to take with us as we took our seats in the rapidly filling hall. An overflow meeting with loudspeakers was arranged downstairs.

Dons, lecturers and other important people occupied the front ten rows or so of seating – the rest of us sat behind. Uniformed Blackshirts wearing frighteningly large metal buckles to their belts stood, shoulder to shoulder, two deep all round the hall, while, in front of the stage, they were massed three deep.

Mosely kept us waiting. Each time we looked round, the Blackshirts had inched nearer, as if we were playing a terrifying game of Grandmother's Steps. The atmosphere became more and more electric.

At last and very suddenly, Mosely appeared in uniform from the back of the stage and gave the fascist salute. As he stepped forward to speak all the students raised and opened their copies of the evening paper and rustled them quietly. Mosely waited. As we lowered them he started to speak, at first quietly and seemingly reasonably – but soon he was shouting about “dirty Jews crawling from the gutter with knives between their teeth”. Someone shouted, “That’s a lie.”

“Throw that man out,” shouted Mosely – and his Blackshirts moved in.

I missed the next bit as someone behind me seized my metal legged chair from under me to use as a weapon and I found myself on the floor. By the time a very large bus driver in *his* uniform had helped me up a real fight had started using the chairs as weapons between the audience and the Blackshirts. I saw one little old lady who had armed herself in advance with a handbag full of coppers running round calling out “Show me a fascist!” and whenever one bent down to pick up a chair she would hit him over the head with her handbag. Someone shouted “Lead the audience out!” but the overflow meeting downstairs had heard over the loudspeaker what was going on and had decided to storm the stairs, thus adding to the confusion.

Meanwhile, Frank Pakenham, now Lord Longford, had made his stately way to the platform and called out to Mosely over the three rows of his Blackshirt bodyguards still in position to guard their leader, “I am a senior member of this University. Call your men off and I will guarantee you a fair hearing” or words to that effect.

“Throw that man out” shouted Mosely, and several Blackshirts got Frank down and started rabbit-punching on the back of his neck. Frank went into that meeting a Conservative and came out a Socialist.

In order to keep the police busy, bus drivers who were on duty had begun, as soon as the meeting started, driving their double deckers round and round the roundabout in the centre of Oxford, thus stopping all the traffic from London to the West Country, and causing incredible confusion.

Phillip Toynbee (Polly Toynbee's father), a student at the house and a great friend of Peter's, came out of the meeting with his face covered in blood where he had been hit by a chair leg. “Don't wipe it!” we shouted at him, and dragged him into the hotel next door which contained a row of telephone boxes. “Ring the national

press! You take the *Times* – you get the *Guardian* – you ring the *Oxford Mail*. Tell them to send a photographer!”

Bernard Flood set off quietly but firmly to find a policeman of his own. His father happened to be in Oxford that day and mention of his name in a very cold voice persuaded a reluctant young bobby to go back with him into the meeting which had restarted with a very much reduced audience. Bernard demanded that someone be arrested for assaulting him.

“Oh yes, son,” sneered the policeman, “and can you give me the name of which gentleman you accuse of hitting you?” The iron entered Bernard’s soul. If, as some think probable, he spied for Russia thereafter, I think it probably the result of that evening. I have heard that he was about to be exposed when as a Labour Member of Parliament he committed suicide, but I think it much more probable that he couldn’t bear to go on living after the death of his wife.

Mosely was still addressing the rump of his audience. Suddenly he caught sight of Phillip Toynbee’s uncle, a mild, respectable Liberal, who happened to wear a beard.

“Throw that man out!” he bellowed again. He obviously imagined that anyone with a beard must be a Communist.

Meanwhile, while most of us milled around outside the hall waiting to catch Mosely coming out, a group of drivers and students went to the car park to find Mosely’s armoured cars – removed the distributor heads and dropped them in the river. The rest of us were hoping to do the same for Mosely himself, but he slipped out a back way, and he and Diana Mitford swept past us in an open car accompanied by a large police escort.