

Dame Stephanie Shirley CH
Oswestry & Henley-on-Thames

Date of Interview: 28.01.2022

Interviewer: Hugh Morgan

Transcript of Audio Recording

I am pleased to reminisce and speak about my relationship with Wales. I'm Dame Stephanie Shirley but in the time that I'm talking about my name was Vera Buchthal. Nobody could pronounce it because it was spelt b-u-c-h-t-h-a-l. I came over as an unaccompanied child refugee from Nazi Europe and had settled with foster parents in the Midlands of England and with whom I was very happy. I was doubly lucky because both my birth parents survived. But, sadly, I never bonded with them again. That often happens when families are separated.

I was with my older sister. We couldn't bear to let go of each other because it was such a major, major uprooting to come from one country to a new country: different language, different parents, different food, different everything. It was traumatic. 1

When we got to England we lived with our foster parents, and I started to visit Oswestry where my mother had settled round about 1942. She had gone to Oswestry partly because it was a border town and she thought that would help in our assimilation. We knew one other family, the Ryders. There was no antisemitism in Oswestry. Correction, certainly not as far as I was concerned. I was in Oswestry for six years from 1946 to 1951 and it was quite an important time for me. Partly because I needed peace and quiet after the turmoil of leaving Austria and my parents; and Oswestry gave me that.

When I got to Oswestry the unisex school apparently announced two little refugee girls were arriving and they would be very disturbed and everyone was to be very nice to us. Certainly that happened. We were not made to feel unwelcome at all. I had not idea the school had been primed for our ingress until years later.

I needed those six years of peace in Oswestry to begin to put down roots. I was very conscious that Oswestry is politically English but geographically Wales. On market day the farmers came down from the hills with their cattle and the whole town spoke Welsh, which I do not. It was a very warm community.

The other link that got us to Wales was my father's story. In 1940 he was interned as an adult German to New South Wales, Australia and then got the opportunity to come out of his internment camp and join the Pioneer Corps in England. First he was in Bicester and then he was put in charge of what became the Mid Wales Psychiatric Hospital at Talgarth. So for several years we would occasionally see him at Talgarth. I can remember picking bilberries on the Brecon Beacons and really feeling the mountain environment that I was accustomed to in Austria.

There are lots of things that make Wales very dear to me. I can remember my tears of joy when I heard people singing spontaneously: on the trains - maybe I was going to Talgarth – which would happen very much in continental Europe. And I sung in my school choir at the Eisteddfod in Llangollen one year.

Later I was billeted in Oakhurst, a hostel for girls. It was an old manor house that had been used commercially by the Coventry Climax company and is today back in private hands. Oswestry Town Council have put a blue plaque up for me in the centre of the town – alongside Wilfred Owen one of the great World War I poets. I am sponsoring a history of Oakhurst as a thank you.

I had the feeling it was a quiet and musical country that valued education and I think that resonated with me even as a child.

So there are lots of links with Wales.

My sister Renate was four years older than I so she was nine when we arrived in England, ten plus at Oswestry. She became infected with the polio virus and was paralysed and in an iron lung at the Orthopaedic hospital for ten months. The Park Hall military training establishment was there. So there was this Robert James and Agnes Hunt hospital with wonderful facilities and in particular they had penicillin which was scarce in those days. She managed to get two doses of penicillin a day for goodness knows how long. It's really rather remarkable that they should do that for a refugee child.

I've been to Oswestry a couple of times recently. Once to unveil the blue plaque when I met some Syrian refugees who've also been made to feel welcome. The town is starting to feel proud of its border status - that it really can welcome different cultures and find them interesting without having to necessarily wanting to change them.

Oswestry is especially important to me because, unusually, they allowed me to study mathematics which in those days girls did not do. (The only science thought respectable for girls of that generation was botany, the study of plants.) But I wanted to study maths and I was pretty firm about it. They put me through some psychological testing and eventually agreed. My girls' school did not have the capability to teach mathematics at the School Certificate level (we called it then) and so I had to go to the unisex boys' school for all my maths lessons. So I was always walking between the two schools which had different

timings. But thankfully somebody somewhere had enough sense to realise I should study mathematics - I wanted to and I had the capability. That was important to me because I spent my main career in the computer industry which in the early days was highly mathematical. So Oswestry has really made my career and I'm very conscious of that. It's important for teachers who have children with a bright spark in them wanting to do something, that they facilitate young people to do what is in them to do.

Starting at 18 I had a vigorous professional career which was thoroughly enjoyable. Now aged 88, I still enjoy work. When I nominally retired at the age of 60 I put my energies and efforts into philanthropy. I operate as a venture philanthropist not just giving money to charities - though I do that as well - but seeing problems, working out a solution, doing a feasibility study to see if we can make something happen. All philanthropists - nothing to do with stamps by the way - aim to make the world a fairer place. I suppose having been considered subhuman by the Nazis I'm conscious of my own position in the world and I'm dedicated to vulnerable people wherever they are.

In general I work with people with Autism Spectrum Disorders because that was my late son's condition. So three quarters of my total spend of some £70m to date is on autism, and the rest is on my professional discipline of information technology. These are the two things I know and care about. There may be other things more important but that is what I choose to do.

My venture philanthropy in autism resulted in quite a few Welsh projects. Because I felt that a bilingual country was particularly hard for people with communication difficulties. In 1999, a very invigorating and creative year for me, I started several projects. I also spent some time and money, mainly money, (because I was employing people to do the work) saving the Brondyffryn school for autism from closure. When we looked at this school the physical conditions were ghastly with wooden boards going across a muddy playground out to the toilets. You knew very well that no inspector would visit because he would have to have the school closed down forthwith. But you could see the excellent teaching of extremely vulnerable, difficult-to-reach children. So I was happy to be able to contribute to Wales in keeping that school going. I have visited it in the last few years and it's now first class all round. I was also privileged to open the Tŷ Coryton school for autism in Cardiff.

I'd set up the All-Party Parliamentary Group For Autism in Westminster and that has turned into the second largest such group. Because of that success I tried the same in Scotland which failed but was a success in Wales where the All-Party group eventually merged into the national charity for Wales, Autism Cymru which I also founded and initially chaired. Autism Cymru had a lifespan of 11 years and took Wales to be the first country in the world to have a national autism policy. It absorbed the Autismconnect portal website.

As the National Ambassador for Philanthropy in 2009/10, I spoke in the Sennedd building to the Community Foundation in Wales.

I'd set up another Welsh project about PECS Picture Exchange Communication System - where you're teaching children of very little communication capabilities by looking at picture exchange: you'd show a picture and its word underneath. Then tomorrow you'd see the same picture with the word underneath. You're trying to set up the association. Then day by day the picture would get smaller and smaller leaving the word underneath. Many months later the child is reading. Very basic stuff but the beginnings of communication when you've got somebody who really is without speech. That project was also subsumed into Autism Cymru.

Autism Cymru was instrumental in working to get the first chair in Autism, I think in the world, certainly in Britain. That was at Cardiff University and was a big step forward. Bilingual Wales certainly led the British Isles for some time in opening doors for people with autism, and in looking after the half a million autistic people and their families in Wales.

That's a quick summary of my recollections of, and relationships with, Wales.

Dame Stephanie Shirley CH
January 2022
www.steveshirley.com

4

1628 words