

# WRDOTR0050

## Transcription of AUOHEN0240

Talk of Peter R uhe with Marjorie Sykes, Sutton Courtney, UK, July 21, 1991

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: This is a talk to Marjorie Sykes, 21<sup>st</sup> July, 1991. Marjorie first of all would you like to tell me a little bit about your youth, where were you born, how were you brought up, about your education.

Marjorie: Well, most people in England would know that my name Sykes is a very common Yorkshire name, especially from the woolen manufacturing districts of the Penn Islands, where for many generations wool was woven by cottage weavers. And the name Sykes indicates the cottage weaver and my family were, right up to the present generation, we are weavers, only of course they have worked in mills in the last few generations. But my father broke away from that tradition and became an *[inaudible]* school teacher, a very good one I think, I mean for more time. He didn't talk about his history very much but we got to know slowly you know.

In fact he had a very great affection for Germany because while he was a student in training, in one of the old men's training colleges, he was apparently selected for a special year in Dresden, for – particularly for science studies. And so he had that extra next year which he loved talking about. A few words of German he remembered, you see, he would bring out.

Interviewer: Must have been at the beginning of the century about.

Marjorie: Yes it was. It must have been the very beginning of the century because he came back and got a job and as soon as he got it, headmaster shape which was quite soon in a ordinary village school. He got married. So, in those days of course it was very, very low pay and so we were a family, we didn't have anything except just enough to live on as it were, very carefully, but we were very happy, and well encouraged to amuse ourselves since it didn't cost anything. That long walks in the hills.

So – but – and also it was the time, I was a child during the first World War, and I still remember my father standing on looking at the photograph that was on the wall in the living room of his German friends and saying, "I wonder what they are doing now."

Interviewer: Especially that place was bombed during the Second World War.

Marjorie: Yeah, yes, I was there. Well, my father – I know it was in the Second World War and my father had died in 1940, and I was always quite glad that he hadn't known that because it would have been so terrible for him. So, we were, you know, we had that kind of a thoughtful kind of home. I was the eldest, two younger ones.

Interviewer: Two younger sisters?

Marjorie: No, a younger sister and a younger brother.

Interviewer: I see.

Marjorie: And so we played around. We had many cousins all of them were of the same age, you see, so we had plenty of playmates as well as our school friends and so on. And of course he was working for the west ridding of Yorkshire education authority. He got moved around to different schools so when I was an adolescent we were in a village outside of Yorkshire town called Wakefield and I went to school in my high school days in Wakefield, which was a nice, very good school.

**[0:05:07]**

And I was able to get – this was just after the first World War was over and the then British government as well as the various local county education authorities were very generous with scholarships for children who seemed to have brains but couldn't afford otherwise to go to the university. And that was how I was able to get scholarships because I happened to be lucky, in the right generation. I was able to go to Cambridge. I still remember my father teaching me how to run a bank account. That is my own finance, I felt very grownup.

Anyway that was – so that was the beginning and then of course in Cambridge just after the war, they were a great many students from overseas who would normally have come earlier but couldn't because of the war conditions, you see, including a lot from India and Sri Lanka.

Interviewer: Really?

Marjorie: Yes. And we had various societies in Cambridge where we all got together.

Interviewer: Was this your first contact with India through these Indian fellow students?

Marjorie: Well, it wasn't quite my first contact because in our village in Yorkshire, there was one of the first two Indian doctors ever to settle in England, and all his children were at school with me including one of my own age who went to

Cambridge along with me also, and with whom I kept in touch. She married a man from Sri Lanka, and we split for many years in Sri Lanka until her husband died and all her brothers and sisters somehow they got back to India. But the father was a very popular doctor in our village. He was kind and, you know, humane, people liked him, but that wasn't really a contact with India because we always – we just thought of him as a doctor.

In Cambridge there were a lot of students and we had these various clubs and societies, not especially for India but for anywhere. The other thing that got my attention was that there also came around in the mid twenties, a whole lot of young people, all of them young from various countries which now we call the third world -- that phrase had not been invented in those days -- who all said that they were looking for recruits for educational work in their own countries. "Because," they said, "whether we like it or not see western civilization is going to have a great impact. We want our people to be prepared, we want them to be able intelligently to choose what is good and reject what is not, and we want help. We would like some young English people to come and work with us."

Several of my friends, some of the young men had the authority to recruit direct from various colleges and so forth. Sri Lanka I know and in western Africa, and some of my classmates went off direct from the university to teach in these various places. I put my name down on a sort of – kind of volunteering employment office as you might say, to be kept in touch with any vacancies that might arise. I was especially thinking of India, but I said anywhere.

**[0:10:14]**

Interviewer: What were you studying, what was your subject?

Marjorie: I was studying the English tripos. Tripos is a Cambridge special name for an honours degree and it meant literature of course with a good deal of language and background language and social history. It was a very interesting course I think. So, I went off and got a job as a teacher in Britain, which they said, you know, any kind of experience is useful naturally. And I had become interested in teaching because of my father's work because he did all sorts of fascinating things in his school and all kinds of things and the *[inaudible]* he was like this inspectors reports and so forth. So they were always asking him to give courses for other teachers you know in practical ways of doing this and that and the other thing. He would go off on Saturday mornings, some central place where they would assemble a group of teachers and he would give courses.

So, I was much interested as I grew up, you see, in what was going on so I thought I was naturally interested in education. And after I had been teaching a very few months a letter came from these people in Cambridge saying there is a very urgently needed job in south India and if you feel able to consider it here is an address in London of somebody who knows about it. Well, that set me off,

they tell me to come on a Saturday morning when I had had a weekend free. Set me off on the next train to London to see, and there I found a young woman who had been teaching in that same school but just had to come back to England because of her family circumstances. So, she showed me photographs and talked about it. It sounded to me a very desirable place. So, I said yes if I wanted I will go. That was how I found myself in Madras.

Interviewer: What did your family say about it, it must have been quite an unusual thing to...?

Marjorie: Yes it was. My family were quite surprised but interested.

Interviewer: So, they supported your idea?

Marjorie: Yes, and when I after several years I came back from India to Britain wearing a khadi, which I had very quickly learned to wear in Madras, you should have seen how my woollen weaving uncles and cousins tremendously interested and very much impressed, you know. They knew all about how to manage wool, but just they were very much interested.

Interviewer: It was when, when did you go to India?

Marjorie: 1928.

Interviewer: First '28.

Marjorie: Twenty eight, yes.

Interviewer: What was your major interest in India at that time or why – as you said you didn't register for any specific country.

Marjorie: No.

Interviewer: It was just by luck that...?

Marjorie: It just happened that it came.

Interviewer: Really?

Marjorie: India was the first, you know..

Interviewer: Would have been an offer from South America you would have gone to South America or?

Marjorie: Yes probably. If it had been a good offer, yes.

Interviewer: But in Cambridge I had several Indian friends, Indians who were studying in my college and in my sister's college, which was different. My sister wouldn't go to the same college cause so much as we were different, and two of those friends were in Madras when I got there. One of them was the daughter of a very distinguished Indian lawyer, justice *[inaudible]* and she was back home in Madras. The other was a student who had rebelled against being married against her will to an older man whom she didn't really want to marry and in insisted as compensation that she must be allowed to study. So, she did and when she returned from Cambridge she got a job teaching in the government women's college in Madras. So, they were both there. It's a good start.

Interviewer: Right, yeah, yeah.

Marjorie: And particularly she told me the judge's daughter was very deeply interested in Gandhi's movement, and so were many other people of course.

Interviewer: What did you know about Gandhi when you went to India?

Marjorie: Practically nothing.

Interviewer: Really?

Marjorie: Very little.

Interviewer: Is it?

Marjorie: I mean students in Cambridge talked about him a bit but they themselves didn't know very much, you see.

Interviewer: What was your spiritual background as far as your family is concerned, was it any religious tradition or spiritual tradition?

Marjorie: Yes, much rather unusual in a way. My father's family and my mother's family had been a part of the large movement of ordinary working people and the Methodist church, which you know branched off from the church of England on various counts. That was one, looking after the poor. And they spent a great deal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and they had belonged to that tradition but my father was absolutely fed up as a youngster by having too much religion thrust down his throat. You know they expect you to go to church twice a day or twice on Sunday and to Sunday school twice on Sunday.

That's too much especially when the Sunday school was taken by good hearted and not very well educated people who just couldn't cope with intelligent boy's