

Chapter 14

RAID ON THE SCHOOL, 27 SEPTEMBER 1975

This Saturday started more or less like any other. I started work in the prints hop at about 07.00 hours. Healy was at the Party's Education Centre in Derbyshire so I was able to set my target to finish late afternoon. I went back to my flat, had a bath, and settled down for a couple of hours' sleep. This sort of day was fantastic. At about 18.00 hours I started my weekly tour round Fleet Street to collect the Sunday papers as soon as the presses started running. This meant that we would get a look at the Sunday papers several hours before they reached the streets. This was one of those rare weekends when there was no pressure to rush back to Healy's flat; I was simply to leave the papers at the front office where a member of our Editorial Board would pick them up, scrutinise them and prepare for the Sunday morning Editorial Board meeting.

The great god Linotype was on my side that night. All the Sunday papers got off to a flyer so I was back in the front office by 19.30 hours. I sorted one of each for the editorial staff and put the rest on a pile for me to take into the Plough pub in Clapham where I would sell them to the eagerly waiting punters (I had to finance a few pints and an Indian take-away somehow) and watch the Saturday night special football with Paul Jennings.

Before going to the pub I decided to flip through the papers myself. I quickly spotted an article in the *Observer* referring to a police raid on our Education Centre. Now if there had already been a police raid on our Education Centre I would certainly have known.

The article was based on an interview given by Irene Gorst, an actress and a member of the Kilburn branch of the WRP. It went on to make a very specific claim: that over 100 police from the Derbyshire police force had made the raid and had discovered an arms cache buried in the grounds. When I read this I couldn't believe it. Initially I thought that maybe there was another education centre in Derbyshire, but the article's mention of the Centre's name, White Meadows, also known as the Red House, soon made it obvious.

I immediately rang the school and spoke to Liz Leicester and Alex Mitchell. I informed them that I suspected that there was to be a police raid that night. I read out the important passages from the paper. Shortly after, Mitchell rang back to double check I had got it right — he must have spoken to Healy in the interim. I was told that they would ring back later. When they did ring, Mitchell had to cut short the call. He had just enough time to tell me that a number of police vehicles had driven into the grounds and had turned on their headlights. "The police are in; will ring back."

About 30 minutes later actor and Party member David Hargreaves rang and told me that on his way to the school he had been caught behind a convoy of police vehicles and they had turned up the lane leading to the school. "What shall I do?" he asked. I told him to park the car and give himself up, and to tell the school comrades that I was anxious to get news.

Liz, the comrade who had answered the phone when I first rang with the warning, was originally from the USA, but had been a member for several years in Britain and was married to another leading member, film director Roy Battersby. Her description of both the raid and the domestic arrangements forced upon her by Party life are very illuminating.

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE POLICE RAID

My memories of the raid on the Derbyshire College of Marxist Education are punctuated with faces, images, sounds. So much was tied up in the event for me — family, history, politics. My road to those events was unusual. But perhaps everyone could say that. Roy and I had moved into a beautiful flat in Maida Vale in 1968 after living in one of the psychiatrist R D Laing's communities in North Finchley for a couple of years. (That is another story and part of our road to the Derbyshire Peak District!) For some time we had been hosting what were known as the "Friday classes" in our spacious front room. These were mostly attended by actors, some writers, some musicians. Gerry Healy usually led the discussion because he considered this such an important group of people, but sometimes it was other leading Party members, Cliff Slaughter, Cyril Smith, Geoff Pilling.

I remember one debate in particular between Healy and Laing which I found very painful and difficult. I felt we had to make a choice between what seemed at the time to be opposing ideologies — something I didn't want to do. But that debate was in Michael Henshaw's Regent's Park flat which was several times more spacious and posh than ours. I remember Alex Mitchell at that particular event. He was new to the movement then and got involved because of his relationship with Joy, who worked with Roy at the BBC.

Roy was asked to go to Derbyshire to oversee the extensive building work when White Meadows — or the Red House as it was known locally — was purchased. He had also been instrumental in recruiting the architect for the project, Bill (?), whom he had worked with in films. And off he went leaving me with Tom and Will — then just under four and two respectively. He never came back to that flat. He wasn't ever given any time off the building project. That was horrible for both of us and of course for the boys as well. Roy was probably asked to run the Derbyshire school before he went to oversee the building work but I don't remember. I just know that he agreed to give up film-making and move and that I supported his decision. I think I was allowed to visit Derbyshire once during these months and can remember being accused of distracting Roy and have a vague and horrible image of a London District Committee in the old offices over the butcher (always associated with the smell of raw meat) at which I was lambasted for a variety of misdemeanours. But that may well have been for some other event/mistake/counter-revolutionary action on my part.

I wasn't allowed to go to Derbyshire for the first school — the actors' school attended by the infamous Irene Gorst at which she allegedly found out about guns hidden in the garden. Healy wanted everything to settle in before I arrived with the boys as undoubtedly our presence would take Roy's mind off the main task of running the school. So back in Maida Vale Party members Geoff Pilling and Sean Hudson helped me pack up and take apart a life of seven years. They were wonderful. I remember Geoff, who was not exactly handy, helping me take down shelves and both of us laughing and laughing until we cried because we were equally useless. Sean packed and drove the lorry with all our belongings to Derbyshire. I drove our Renault estate with the boys, our plants and our cat Fritz who had been with us for years. It was very emotional for me. Both boys had been born while we lived in Maida Vale, I was part of a close network of women with small children with whom I had shared birth, childcare and friendship. It was a wonderful situation for the boys with a big, enclosed and safe communal garden behind our flats. It was hard to go.

When I arrived I think it was the second intake of students at the school. It was what we called an "international" school, attended by people from a variety of countries. At this point, the local community thought White Meadows was a cultural/theatrical/arts centre. They were aware of the involvement of a variety of film and theatre people such as the Redgraves and Roy in the project. No one knew that in fact what had been set up was a College of Marxist Education.

Not long after I arrived in Derbyshire my parents came to visit.

They were living in Montreal at that time and travelled to England by freighter, arriving in Felixstowe. I drove down to meet them with the boys. One of my main memories of that trip was that the dipped headlights on the car didn't work and I drove back through the night with irate drivers flashing their lights and honking as I blinded them with my brights. That was the first of many vehicle dramas for me, a direct result of having no time and no money to ensure what you were driving was safe.

I think it was the day after my parents arrived that all hell broke loose. I have a memory of taking a phone call on the school pay phone in the office, from Norman in London. It was a Saturday night and the Sunday papers were already out in London. Norman said that there was a big spread in the *Observer* based on a story by Irene Gorst — who it turned out had not been a genuine student at the first actors' school. As a result of her story, there were allegations that we were plotting and planning against civil society and had weapons buried in the garden. I just remember Norman reporting this briefly and asking me to tell Healy.

(On reflection, I am not one hundred per cent sure that it was me who took Norman's call. But it seems likely as there was a meeting going on in Healy's flat at the time which involved everyone else who was allowed to answer the phone.)

I think I knocked on Healy's door, gave Aileen the message and went back upstairs. Not long afterwards, my mother and I were standing at the bedroom window of our flat upstairs measuring for curtains. I looked out and saw a dark blue transit van driving up the road. Corinna Lotz had been out in the van and I remember thinking that it was Corinna returning. Then I saw that there were lots of dark blue transit vans on the road and almost in the same instant the lights were turned on in them and I saw they were full of police all getting ready to jump out.

This time I am very sure what happened. I ran down the back stairs, through the kitchen and dining room where people were sitting reading and studying. As I ran, the police started coming in through every door, window and possible opening. I just had time to knock again on Healy's door which was again answered by Aileen Jennings. I think I probably said something like "there are police everywhere", she thanked me and shut the door. I think Alex Mitchell, Roy, Healy, Aileen and Cliff Slaughter were all in Healy's flat. There may have been others.

I ran back up the stairs — I can't remember how I managed that but I guess there was a great deal of chaos. The boys were upstairs asleep and they were my first concern. I don't know what happened to my mother, how she got taken downstairs and I can't remember where my father was. He was probably upstairs with us and I guess the police must have made them go downstairs with everyone else. Because of the boys I was allowed to sit upstairs.

As well as concern for them, I felt I was doing something very important because I had the register of students upstairs with me. It showed that we had people attending the school who came from countries with fascist governments such as Greece, Spain and Portugal and I was very aware of the danger they would be in if they were identified and possibly deported. So throughout the night I sat on the light blue, hardback A4 book which contained everyone's names and countries of origin. I took it with me when I went to the toilet, scared to death that the policewoman who sat upstairs with me would notice and take it away.

And that was by and large my night. My parents were downstairs with everyone else; I had no idea what was happening to them and everyone else. I was desperately worried about everything and told nothing by the police. My younger son Will woke up at some point. Rather than try to get him to go back to sleep, I got out some toys and he sat on the round rug we had in the living room happily playing. The policewoman was being very friendly to him, which annoyed me.

Eventually a group of trench-coated policemen came into the flat accompanied by Roy and Cliff. I didn't know at the time about the spontaneous and courageous act by all the students who pretended not to know any English and couldn't therefore answer the police questions. I didn't know about the negotiations that had gone on so that Roy and Cliff could accompany the police on their search. I didn't know anything about anything at this point. When the police, Roy and Cliff appeared in our hallway I remember getting very angry and saying to the police that they should let my parents come upstairs, that they had only just arrived in this country and that they were older people who would be suffering a great deal as a result of all this. I will never forget one of the trench-coats saying to me in the most smarmy, sarcastic way: "Of course, Mrs Battersby, we are very reasonable people." I also remember clearly being very angry when they turned on the lights in the bedroom where my older son Tom was sleeping and tipped all his toys out on the floor. I was pleased when they came upon a dead mouse behind the wardrobe. And, needless to say, nothing else.

I only found out later that I had escaped being strip-searched by being held upstairs on my own. All the other women had to go through this, including my mother, who objected and asked the police what they would do if she refused. I'm not sure what they said but it was not pleasant, so she complied. Because of my parents' own political history in the Communist Party in the United States in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s I knew they would handle this OK. But they were amazed by the actions of the Labour government and police in what they still assumed was a very civilised country in comparison with the witch-hunting USA. My father took great delight in saying a hearty hello to the local Ashbourne police whenever he saw them in the following weeks. They were among the police from five different forces who raided the school that night.

Others can write more effectively and no doubt remember more clearly the campaign that was launched immediately after the raid and the libel trial against the *Observer* newspaper that followed. For me, one of the sharpest memories is of the following day.

I was sent with my parents and sons down to the local pub in Parwich to introduce myself to the pub landlord, Alan Wood. He had got to know the guys doing the building work on the school but, like all the other local people, thought they were working on an arts and cultural centre. It must have been a helluva Sunday morning for all the people in Parwich who opened their newspapers to find they had the College of Marxist Education just down the road and that we (allegedly) had guns buried in the garden!

So I was despatched with my family as the acceptable, family face of Marxism to say hello to Alan and the rest of the Parwich community. My mother and father agreed to come with me and sat with the boys at a table outside the pub. I fought my way in — it was packed with journalists and others no doubt wanting to hear the

story and talk about the exciting events of the previous night. I went up to the bar, put out my hand to Alan Wood and said something like: "Hi, nice to meet you, I'm Liz Battersby, Roy's wife."

Well, the whole place went quiet. I don't think I've ever had such an impact on a crowd.

That was the beginning of what became a very friendly, if always slightly edgy, relationship between us and the people of Parwich. Some of them were extraordinarily helpful and kind. I remember particularly the farm family down the road, the milkman and the teacher in the two-room school house where Tom started primary school.

And the rest is history.

It was another five to six hours before the school was able to get back to me. I was told that the police had searched the place thoroughly. All they claimed to have found were three 202 bullets in a cupboard at the top of some narrow stairs. The circumstances of this "find" were suspicious. The couple of hours' warning that I had given our comrades by spotting the danger enabled them to focus their minds on the impending raid and time to plan how they would insist any search be carried out: that leading comrades went round with any group of police. The overseas comrades had time to consider how they would handle any questioning they would be put under.

I learned afterwards that the local farmer and milkman had been out for their Saturday night drink. When approaching the school they had seen the police activity. Not daring to drive past they pulled up a side lane and spent the night in the car. The farmer asked what it was all about. When he was told that they had been looking for arms and had not found any he said that they would have had a better chance at his place!

By now the Plough pub was closed, even the lock-in, and so was the Indian take-away. To quote a phrase: "Things are constantly changing." It sure did for me that night.

Some more background to the raid is given in the following. It is taken from a file that I found when going through my documents. I am not certain who it was written by:

THE ASTOR CONNECTION

The *Observer* is the organ of the Rt. Hon. David Astor, heir to the fortunes of the American Astor family. During the 1930s the family's country seat at Cliveden received notoriety as the meeting place of the pro-Nazi elements of the British ruling class. On one occasion Von Ribbentrop spent a weekend there. When Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was in London in 1974 he went to Cliveden to relax for the weekend with Labour politicians, bankers and Whitehall chiefs. David Astor himself has never occupied Cliveden.

Astor keeps a staff of senior writers who work hand in glove with the Foreign Office and the Home Office. At the time of the raid they included political correspondent Nora Beloff, foreign correspondent Gavin Young, and finance correspondent Andrew Wilson.

The "Observer Foreign News Service", a news agency offshoot run by the paper, has the closest connection with the Foreign Office, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. Astor, Beloff and company acted as unofficial public relations officers for the Jenkins/ Prentice, "Social Democratic Alliance", wing of the Labour Party.

The provocation [the raid on the school] organised in conjunction with the Home Office and the police followed a witch-hunt against the "Militant" group. This was as a result of the successful ousting of Prentice by the Newham North East constituency Labour Party.

Although the *Observer* had the Gorst Affidavit for two weeks the story was not published until September 28th, the day before the 75th annual Labour Party conference. It coincided with the Blackpool speech by Prentice, pre-released to the press, in which he denounced "extremists" in the Labour Party, and the publication of an SDA document alleging links between Labour MPs and Trade Union Leaders and the Communist Party. These are clear signs that the raid on the WRP formed part of an orchestrated campaign

During the early 1960s Cliveden was once again in the news when it was discovered that Tory War Minister John Profumo met prostitute Christine Keeler at Cliveden. Among the other guests were society doctor Stephen

Ward, aristocrats, a junior Russian diplomat, and the Pakistan dictator Ayub Khan. To this day Cliveden remains a seat of conspiratorial gatherings of the ruling class and its time servers.

Arising out of the police raid the WRP took the *Observer* to court and although we won the case, massive costs were awarded against us. The following passage is also taken from a document discovered when going through my files. It was obviously written between the raid and the Observer Court Case.

BACKGROUND TO THE RAID ON THE EDUCATION CENTRE AT PARWICH, DERBYSHIRE, ON SATURDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 1975

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that the pretext for the police raid was provided by an article which appeared in the *Observer* dated Sunday 28 September. Towards the end of the six-hour raid, senior police officers freely admitted that it was the *Observer* article that had prompted the attack. We couldn't just ignore it, one police officer said.

The first edition of the *Observer* came off the presses in London between 18.30 and 19.00 hours on the Saturday evening. But it is certain that from the amount of pre-planning and sheer weight of equipment and forces that the police were ready to move well before the paper was on the streets.

This means that there was direct collusion between the police and the *Observer* newspaper for the purpose of carrying out a provocation on the WRP and its school. The crucial sentence in the *Observer* reads: "Members have been known to hint at arms caches hidden in the grounds, and to have access to secret cabinet minutes." The information for the article was provided by Irene Gorst, a member of Equity, the actors' union. In her article she says that she joined the WRP in March this year, 1975. It has since been established that she wrote in to the party asking to join and she subsequently joined the Kilburn branch, membership card number 5005.

The next document I want to quote is a statement made by Vanessa Redgrave relating to a telephone conversation with someone called Aveline. It is not known who Aveline was, but the conversation took place shortly after midnight on Sunday 13 October 1975:

When I got home I found a message to telephone Aveline. I rang Aveline while Corin was on the line listening. Aveline sounded surprised that I had phoned him. He seemed to be taken off balance and said: "Oh yes, just a minute, I'll go to the other phone." He then suggested that I meet him. He said he wanted to talk "but not on the phone". He said: "Irene Gorst is getting the blame. But she is not to blame. She is 100 per cent WRP; the whole thing has been a terrific miscarriage." He said that I would "do myself good to know the real story".

He then asked: "You know who I am?" I said: "Yes." He said: "I could meet you tomorrow." He then added: "I'm not being taped, am I?" I said: "No." He said that he could see me tomorrow. "But I don't know where I'll be," he said, "I'll have to let you know. Where can I ring you?" "My last appointment is a dentist appointment at 3.30," I said. "Well, I'll ring you back on this number tomorrow and let you know."

He added: "I can't go out now; it would be noticed. If we meet tomorrow maybe we could meet in the park. You come in your car and I will come in mine." Then he added, "Didn't I see you today? Isn't your car SMP 954?" I said "I beg your pardon? Where did you see me?" "Just a second," he said, "there was some confusion." And then the phone rang off and he didn't ring back.

Vanessa Redgrave's description of her telephone conversation with the unidentified Aveline is puzzling. Was the purpose of the telephone call to suggest that Irene Gorst had nothing to do with the raid? Was Aveline just an innocent actor contact? The precise origins of the raid will not be known without an inquiry of some kind, but the following letter from Irene Gorst to Corin Redgrave makes no attempt to deny that she had been in contact with the *Observer*.

24.10.75

Dear Corin,

This must be written by me, because of the very strong feelings I had for you those months past. No statement or comment was made by me to the press regarding you personally, so all that was printed "rags" — who knows where it came from. For the pain and hurt that it must have caused your wife, I can only regret bitterly the fact that the press found that aspect of everything so interesting. I wish you happiness and truth.

Irene