

Elsie (E)

Voices of the Cold War in the 1950s PhD research

Anti-nuclear campaigner, wife to Reverend Sydney Hinkes well-known activist (deceased)

Interviewed 9/3/2015

Year and place of birth, 1925; Ilford, Essex

Tascam DR-05

Interviewed by Jessica (J)

Recording information: the interview was interrupted, as Elsie had invited a close friend to listen. Pauses were made for Elsie to attend to her friend, have a tea break and also to check that she was happy to continue.

J: So this is Jessica Douthwaite recording on the ninth of February twenty fifteen.

E: March

J: [both laugh] ninth of March twenty fifteen, thank you Elsie, please can you confirm your full name and your date of birth?

E: Elsie Rose Hinkes, twenty seventh of November, nineteen twenty five.

J: And where were you born?

E: Ilford, in Essex.

J: Ok, and did you grow up with brothers and sisters?

E: One older sister

J: um, and what kinds of things did your parents do? What was their occupation?

E: My father was an accountant, and uh he and my mother were very loyal church people, so, their life was very much centred round our church where we attended, and they were very outward looking people who would do anything for anybody.

J: And did you go to school close to the church?

E: yes, yes, Gearie school in Ilford, yes

J: And did you enjoy school?

E: Oh yes, I loved it, yeh that was the junior school.

J: Can you tell me a bit more about your childhood in Ilford and growing up with your family?

E: Very happy, lovely loving parents who were always keen for us to be taken out, a lot of our spare time was spent in our local park, swimming pool and just playing games and enjoying it, and um, I had started at the grammar school in Dagenham, uh in nineteen thirty six, which was a brand new school and um then that came to a bit of an end in nineteen thirty nine when we were all evacuated, and sent down to, our school was sent to Weston-Super-Mare.

J: So you went with your school friends?

E: yes, and uh, my future husband was at another school at Dagenham and through the muddle up of the week before the war started he got evacuated with us and we met on the train [both laugh] being evacuated to the west country.

J: So how old were you?

E: Thirteen, he was fourteen [laughs]

J: And how long did you stay in Weston-Super-Mare?

E: I stayed just a year, and came back in the summer of nineteen forty and he joined his own school in Ilfracombe and stayed on for another um two years and he came back in nineteen forty two.

J: Mm. And what are your memories of that period?

E: Very happy I had good billets, and the first one was on the farm which gave me a great desire to [interview is interrupted by the entrance of Elsie's friend]. It's alright [aside] a great desire to go in the land army later on.

J: And um, what about, memories of [some disturbance] I'm going to pause it.

[Recording begins again]

J: ok, so you spent a year in Weston-Super-Mare.

[00:03:09]

E: uh, no, only the first three weeks and then our schools were sorted out and we were moved to Street, not far away, in Somerset where the Clark's shoe factory is and I really had that whole year in Street. And we joined forces with Street Grammar school and they had half day schooling and we had half day schooling with our own teachers that we had back in Dagenham, and um, on the half days when uh we weren't at school our teachers kept us occupied um there was a good village hall and we used to go there for games, we were well looked after.

J: Can you remember much about the war, at the time?

E: oh, every, I could describe yes, I mean blow by blow

J: Please do

E: it was horrific [laughs] well that, you see, that first year nothing no thirty nine to September forty, nothing happened, that's why we all drifted, well some of us, drifted home and my father had found out that our school back in Dagenham was opening up with a skeleton staff and so he said would you like to come home as the war doesn't seem to be starting and of course bang on September we go back to school and, the bombing of London started, so we didn't do much schooling, and then my father found a job for me that Christmas, I'd just had my fifteenth birthday, that's right, and I started working at a solicitor's office in London and my school had taught me shorthand typing and book keeping and uh I had managed to pass some of pitman's exams and I just jumped from being a schoolchild to, being a grown up going up to London over all the firemen's hoses and the rubble, and the, the bombing [laughs].

J: So can you tell me how you felt at that time when London was being bombed and... the war was...

[00:05:24]

E: well, we just got on with it it was just, what was happening... um, we were frightened, of course, when the air raid siren went, but you just you just went to the shelter, or carried on if you were, [laughs] not gonna go to the shelter um...

J: And did your father stay in his job throughout the war?

E: oh yes, yes, he joined the Home Guard, that was that was a story in itself, yes he, he was in the Home Guard, very loyal cause he'd been in the, Great war, First World War.

J: What did he do in the Home Guard, was he a warden?

E: well no, I don't know, he was just a soldier training to stop the Germans coming across if they ever got here

J: yeh, yeh

E: they had their drill...

J: and your sister? What was she doing?

E: She was a civil servant, she went to Ilford Grammar school, and she passed the civil service exams, she's three and a half years older than me, and uh she was evacuated to Bristol as a safe place, well ha ha, and um, she used to come across on the train, to see me as my older sister, in Street, to make sure I was alright, you know, so that was rather lovely.

J: yeh,

E: and um, I don't remember when she came home, but of course she met a young man at work and went into the, air force and uh, they married the same year as my husband and I did, nineteen forty five. That's jumped a bit [laughs].

J: um, so tell me about that, how did you meet your husband after he came back from evacuation?

E: well, he came, he he knew he knew where I lived, and uh I had been home, and I was at our church hall helping with our guide leaders wedding, we were serving the food, and my guide leader's wedding and my dad appeared, at the church hall and said 'are you gonna be home soon because there's a young man waiting to see you' and uh so I said 'well, he'll have to wait because I can't leave until the wedding's over', you know, anyway, when I got home it was Sydney. [Elsie talks about Sydney who had turned eighteen a few months before and received his call up papers, he joined the army in nineteen forty three. Elsie and Sydney became closer in that time, he joined the signals and later the paratroopers.]

[00:08:26]

J: And what did you think about that [referring to his position in the paratroopers]

E: I was very proud of him, very proud and I had a lovely photo with his parachute wings on my, because I joined the army in nineteen forty four, having not been able to join the land army because by that time they weren't recruiting any more girls to the land army, so I joined the army, and I'd got this lovely photo of him with his parachute wings on my barrack bed table [both laugh]... very proud, of course his mum and father were very very upset... worried worried, yeh.

J: and what was his experience like of joining the army did he talk to you much about it?

E: well, I I I wish he was here [laughs] to tell you, um he was always, he never smoked and he never drank and he was always the one that would go out with the boys at the pub at night so that he could see any drunks were safely back in their barracks.

J: Ok and how about you, why did you decide to join the army aside from...

E: well, because I was disappointed at not going, I'd already told um the uh, I I had changed, um, I was still working for the solicitor's up til, nineteen forty four but I was in a different office, still in London, and I had already told them that I was going to be call, I was going to join, so I didn't want to feel a fool, so I joined the army instead.

J: and can you tell me what you did in the army?

E: well, the short hand typing, I was posted to Portsmouth with an ACAC [Air Cargo Allocation Centre?] um artillery, but I never fired any guns I was in office, and then I got a job back in London, in the Royal Army Chaplain's department up in uh, Leconfield house, round Soho way somewhere and uh, I was a year with them, that was lovely, because they were all um, I was there from forty five to forty six and all the chaplains who'd been in the army all the war, were gradually coming home and our job was to give them their travel warrants and to, give them a cup of tea in the office and some of them would sit and talk about where they'd been, it was a lovely year, that was, yeh.

J: And was that the last year of the war?

[Elsie considers dates, counting to remember which years she was in the army, here service went from 1944 to 1946.]

J: ok, so can you tell me a bit about the war ending and how it felt, what were your feelings and what were you doing at the time?

E: well, my husband had already, done one, um, trip to the, Ardennes, but they didn't jump that time that was in December nineteen forty four, they went across by sea but they had a terrible time battling with the Germans, he got home safely from that and then in nineteen forty five, march the twenty fourth they jumped over the rhine, uh, right onto an enemy sort of encampment, so he saw a lot of his comrades, just gunned down before their parachutes ever really opened you know, and uh he survived that and got home, so um, of course he was in secret locations so we didn't know where he was until afterwards and you might get a letter from a field office and saying you know, he was ok, um I was always very proud of him, and very nervous that, he wouldn't make it, you know, but he did make it home and um, having uh because by this time he'd already decided to he wanted to be ordained and was on the pathway bit he'd got a lot of study to do and we promised our respected parents that we would wait for seven years, although, we were engaged in nineteen forty four at the age of nineteen, um eighteen I was, um that we would wait seven years til he'd done all his training, when he came back from the jump over the rhine he said could we get married, and I said well when he said well next Saturday [Jessica laughs] so I said well no that's a bit quick because my dad used to go away and do auditing and my dad was away so I said I couldn't get married next Saturday because I'd have to ask my dad, and he's not here, so he said well what about Saturday week, so I said, well I'll have to ask my dad and in fact we were married on the Saturday week with a full three tier wedding cake which my, mum got stuff from all our relations to, because it was all rationed, food and we had a wonderful wedding, a picture of which is in my book so you'll see that...

[00:13:54]

J: so um you asked your dad, but he was uh...

E: yeh, he was uh, he said... I went through the first world war, and your Sydney has been through similar, and he's a man and who am I to stop you doing what you want to do, they were very generous because looking back I was nineteen, he was twenty they must have been horrified [laughs] when I think about it as a mother now, but nobody stopped us, no.

J: and after you were married did you move into your own home?

E: no no no, my parents made us, no not straight away because we were both in the army so he went back he had a few months in England after, the jump over the rhine, but he still had another two years army service cos the those who were called up had to do at least four years, and he'd only done two, forty three to forty five, so he got and he was sent to Palestine, so I stayed in the army for another year and then I came out and my mum and dad, again generous, made over the whole of the top of our house in Ilford as a, self-contained flat with our own kitchen and bedroom and sitting room, we just had to share the bathroom and um he came home to that in nineteen forty seven and I had a nice little flat [Elsie points out a bookcase in her room, noting that it was one of the only new pieces of furniture in their flat and then describing what other pieces of furniture they were given by others in the community] my mum and dad never interfered but of course he wasn't home he was only there on leave and then he went to Palestine, and so um, no I mean, no I've got it muddled now, sorry, pause it cos I've got my dates wrong.

J: it's ok we don't need to pause it

E: I was still in the army, until forty six and I got the home ready for him coming in forty seven, that was it, and we had about six months, there, and uh, in September nineteen forty seven he went to college in Canterbury to start his theological training [Elsie then talks about St Augustin's College London-based degree, which Sydney achieved in 1950. They joined a church in Canterbury.] ... and some very kind people discovered that he'd got a wife they didn't know that this young theological student had got a wife and the lady set about finding a flat for us in Canterbury [in spring 1948, Elsie moved to Canterbury and left the home her parents had made for them. They spent two years there, where Sydney was allowed to live out, which was unusual in those days, as was being married at that age.]

J: And what were you doing when you moved to Canterbury?

E: ah well I was busy having a baby wasn't I [both laugh] our first daughter was born in Canterbury in nineteen forty nine... I was just a housewife I didn't have a job we had a very meagre army allowance cos they were very good to the soldiers who came out and went into training, about five pounds a week which paid for the, rent of the flat and the food, and that, I didn't have a job in Canterbury I think I was busy the students all used to come round to our flat for cups of tea [laughing]

J: So it was a nice community?

E: happy, yeh, happy happy happy.

J: what was the community like at the time? Did you become part of the community?

E: well the church mainly, that was my, focus St Mildred's, I got into the Young Wives, was starting up there, that was an offshoot of Mother's Union, for young mums with babies, they got me young wives and uh having the students and looking after my husband I was very busy, I was very happy and we made so many friends in Canterbury the children of whom I'm still in touch [Elsie describes that connection.]

J: and, what was life like in general in Britain at the time?

E: oh very austere we were still queuing up with our meat rations and, having, you know the rations meted out to us, we were still trying to make do with sausage meat sausage pies and things like that, a great thing in Canterbury I remember, is the um uh what was the British restaurants where we could go and get a really good hot meal and there was one in Canterbury so we used to go there twice a week and, get a good hot dinner.

J: and how did you feel about that was it just something that happened or...?

E: just something that happened, I mean, it was part of life, they held the rations out you see... um.

J: so after Canterbury then...

[Elsie describes how Sydney attended theological college in Oxford however their marriage wasn't recognised at college so they moved back to the flat above their parents' house in Ilford. Elsie had their second daughter there in 1951. Sydney used to cycle home from Oxford to Essex 'because we didn't have much money, it is about 50-60 miles 'he used to come in exhausted'. They spent two years living in Ilford. Their first 'real home' was set up in 1952, when Sydney was ordained to a parish in Burton on Trent.] ... we had our first real big house there that was massive [laughs] we were, rattling around in it with our two little girls [laughs].

J: And how did it feel at that point um moving into your first proper home?

E: well I thought we'd gone a long way north [both laugh] I'd never been, I had been to Scotland for a holiday but when I was quite young and going to burton I just thought gosh we're [laughs] a long way from home. Uh, it wasn't a gloriously happy time, let's put it like that, um I was quite lonely really [laughs] missed my family.

[00:22:21]

J: how long were you there for?

[After two years Sydney and Elsie moved to Essex county, Leigh on Sea.] ... and that was very happy time until the Suez war came [laughing] but you're not talking about the Suez war...

J: no [laughs] we can talk about the Suez war, but before we do, can you remember thinking much during those years about international politics?

E: no, not at all, we were glad the war was over, um... it was the Suez that got us into international politics, absolutely, um no, we were just, very... um, happy that the war was over and happy that, I suppose different things were being taken off rationing, and um no, personal I didn't, no.

J: so there were no events or kind of the beginning of the Cold War that...

E: no, no, nothing really happened til nineteen fifty six.

J: so tell me what it was about nineteen fifty six, can you explain what the Suez crisis was and what you thought of it at the time?

E: ... we had been, to a summer school with, oh I forgot to mention I had a little boy in burton on trent, we took them to a summer school... run by a missionary society and at the end of that week we had signed up to go to southern Rhodesia to the sirene mission, my husband to be a teacher and chaplain to the mission and that was in the summer of nineteen fifty six, the Suez war broke out in the, November I think it was, I've got the cuttings there [aside] um can you just open up that um the very top, I think there's some, oh no not that one [sound of shuffling papers].

J: I'll have a look at it later.

E: oh no anyway, um my husband had studied, um the sort of church's teaching on the just war, beforehand, and um because various things in the army had begun to make him think about, peace and war and what the church was involved with and he had really become a pacifist um and he had studied the church's teaching on their teaching on the just war and, yeh?

J: can you just explain what the just war is? Just briefly explain.

E: well, having a real reason for killing other people, and there's very few instances in which that is allowed by the church, it's gotta be, you know, the the everything is nobody's going, to get killed other than the soldiers, I can't really explain it any better than that...

J: no I just wanted to be clear.

E: a theologian could, but that is basically if if you study what the church teaches there are very few reasons for having a war at all, and um so he preached a sermon at the church, against, in, Britain going into the um the war, with the French and the Israelis against the Egyptians who wanted to have a complete control of the Suez canal which had been was British you see, and it was all a connivance with the heads of government and he preached a sermon against it, half the congregation got up and walked out and this caused a furore in the parish, this reached the local news and the national news and Rhodesia house who had already issued him with his permit to work in Rhodesia, read well it was brought to their notice that this clergyman was preaching against his government... so they called us to Rhodesia house and asked us to bring our work permit with us, this was in November, already our, berths were already on the boat to go to Rhodesia, cos there was no flying then, with the missionary society and Rhodesia house, literally snatched the work permit out of his hand put it in a drawer, locked the drawer and said you'll no longer be wanted in, Rhodesia, because uh we don't want any priests who might oppose the government, so we didn't go to Rhodesia, that is why nineteen fifty six is such a big memory and uh for a week we were, my husband was taken off all duties cos the vicar didn't know

what to do with this curate you see, who'd upset half his parishioners and so he suspended him, but within a week uh he'd conferred with the bishop and all was forgiven and we actually stayed there another two years before we moved to Slough, where all this came in with the Aldermaston marches, we still weren't very politically um involved except that at Leigh on Sea we'd been concerned about the H-bomb being um invented was it you know, um practiced, and uh experimented with, and we were all very worried about the air being polluted, so we'd got that far.

[00:28:15]

J: just going back to not being able to go to Rhodesia and the controversy surrounding his sermon, what did what was your reaction to that?

E: well we got, I've got masses of correspondence from the people who had read about it and all peace activists and people saying 'well done you seem to think like us, come and join our group', so we did join the Anglican pacifist fellowship, and um, uh, well, we were uh, pretty ostracized by another group, but you had to get up everyday and have breakfast and have dinner, with three children you've got to keep them going as if nothing had happened, but um, it was very worrying hen the uh news first broke about his sermon because the newspaper reporters were at the end of the road and you know taking the children to school I had to try and go round the back way and I think they did get very distressed, they knew there was something wrong about their dad, you know, weren't quite sure what it was, these three little kids [laughs]...

J: but he was only suspended for a week [Elsie speaks over]?

E: oh we all got over it, we got all over it um yes.

J: and um, just on the, you were saying that at Leigh-on-Sea you began to get worried about the kind of health effects

E: yes, yes, yeh, mainly about the um we were the you know being the news was coming out about what was the further more international reaction about the H-bombs that we dropped I mean when we just heard about that in nineteen forty five we thought 'oh good the japs have been defeated' and then, ten years later, you know we began to realise what a really diabolical thing had happened...

J: so you remember reading newspapers about

E: yes, I haven't actually got any cuttings about that at all

J: what kinds of things did you think might happen to you?

E: We thought the children would get poisoned with the, food and the milk they were the food they were eating and the milk they were drinking... there was a really really big push for mothers to breastfeed their babies, I can remember that clearly.

[00:30:44] Interview comfort break.

J: so we were talking about how um your husband began to get involved with the pacifist movement and you were concerned with the health scares surrounding radiation, was that the moment at which you also considered yourself a pacifist?

E: No, not me, no I hadn't no, not really, it came a little bit later when I, started realising that I was, I was in it with him you know [laughs]

J: can you tell me more about that how you realised you were becoming a pacifist?

E: well, because we started to move in pacifist groups and circles and that became quite an overriding part of our life, you know going to, pacifist meetings and meeting other pacifists that never sort of considered in our circle before.

J: so there was the Anglican...

E: pacifist fellowship, yeh,

J: and was that the main one?

[Elsie says that was the main pacifist group. The other key group that Sydney became involved with was a race relations group, there were meetings of people of different faiths and countries living in Slough. 'That was another lovely experience'. Elsie became involved in the race relations activism too, inviting people to stay in their home if they needed somewhere to house.]

J: can you tell me a bit more about that how you both um began to think that was an important issue and what it meant to you?

[Slough was a welcoming town, with history of immigration from 1930s onwards. Sydney joined Trade Union council on behalf of 'coloured' churchgoers, through this TU council many meetings and festivals were arranged. Elsie became involved directly after taking in a West Indian lady and her children into their home, she had been turned out by her husband. The family slept in the garage over the weekend.]

... by Monday morning when we got in touch with the social workers to come and help this lady they said oh well she's not homeless if you've brought her in and of course if you can realise the home situation was desperate, in slough jobs were plentiful but homes they were just crowded with all these Indians and west indian families, absolutely packed, so there was no housing for them...

[Elsie describes how they bought a caravan from their neighbours, put it up in their own back garden, with permission from the council for the West Indian family to live in it, but not to cook. By that point Elsie had a fourth child of her own and may also have had five too]...

So we really our parsonage was rather full, so the lady and her three children slept in the caravan and came into our house every morning for breakfast and the children went off to school with our children and that was seven months before Slough were able to re-house her [Elsie is still in touch with all those children].

J: what did you think about Slough council's decision at that point, how did you feel towards the social services and the council for the decisions they were making?

E: well, you know, I didn't spend much time thinking, there was always something to do, I'd also become a foster mother, um, oh that's another story [laughs] so we'd got um daytime foster children, I looked after babies during the day and I didn't really do a lot of actual thinking if you can understand that, life was a bit busy I'd got five children, I'd got this family in the caravan, uh, I'd got...

J: so you were, you were doing these daily activities, but in terms of what the government was doing and politics did you think about, um, politics itself in the country?

E: no, not really, no, not me, I didn't, no.

J: but did you vote?

E: oh yes, I've always voted, oh yes, oh yes, my father was very strict on that [laughs]

J: ok, so going back to the pacifism, um tell me a bit more about how you became involved... after 1956...

E: well I think it was mainly worry about the atom bombs and the h-bombs and we moved to slough in nineteen fifty eight, just when, it wasn't CND then but those people were beginning to get together and um my husband was right in the forefront of it all and he was in the slough uh not only the trade union council it was the h-bomb something, I can't think and then of course these marches started from going to London from Aldermaston and coming through slough and I told you in my letter and that was the main anecdote but always, my my part of it, was always caring, or [laughs] looking after someone else, people just arrived at our house [laughs] I was always looking after someone, um.

J: but these marches can you explain more about the motives of the marches?

E: well to get the government to stop making the h-bombs and to nuclear weapons, it was always against nuclear weapons cos we just thought [laughs] diabolical.

J: so um the ultimate objective was for Britain to get rid of this, nuclear weapons?

E: yes, yeh, yeh, yeh, to really to um disarm altogether we'd be very happy to have complete disarmament but of course that you get a lot of opposition to that.

J: and by that you mean no weapons at all.

E: no nothing no no well you can't kill anyone if you haven't got any weapons, killing one another is not a nice way to live is it? No...

J: ok, so um, explain, you mentioned that your role was caring, can you tell me um in what sense do you mean that what happened on the marches?

E: oh well I didn't care for anybody there except my own family, an no, well we just marched and sang and marched and sang and either went to London or went to Aldermaston, and I was limited in what I could do with, five sort of well they weren't all small by this time, but we did take the children, mainly I I went from Slough to London, that was my main part, yeh.

J: how did you feel on the march?

E: excited, exuberant that we were getting somewhere, knowing full well that the government wouldn't take a slight [laughing] piece of notice [laughing]... they were very jolly times, musicians and people you know excited and happy.

J: and this was with friends you'd already made, or did you meet new people?

E: well, we usually tried to join up with the Anglican pacifist fellowship group because we had a cross and my husband used to carry the the cross, so we usually were with the APF, but, on the marches you you couldn't always keep up with your own you get sort of a bit mished up and mashed up and sometimes you find you'd be walking under a trade union banner [laughs] you'd got behind or you'd got ahead, but um from my own personal point of view I wasn't politically thinking of anything much except that we've got to stop this we've got make the government stop making armaments particularly nuclear bombs nuclear weapons that was our chief concern and it still is now, um I I will support anything against trident and doing this trident programme again now, it's just wicked, the money that's wasted, mm.

J: was that also a concern at the time of Aldermaston with the money were you thinking about that?

E: yeh, well yes, it's a wicked waste of taxpayers' money.

J: can you tell me about the time that the march came past your church?

E: well yes, um, it was a saturday you see, they came through Slough and a little note used to be passed along between the marchers that, you might get room on the floor at St. Peter's parsonage at fifty two martin (sp?) lane and uh they used to collect buckets of funds for uh along the way you know people would be watching they'd pass buckets along for the funds and these were passed along in our to our church on the Saturday night and were safe in our church safe and on the Sunday morning the choir boys would all form a line along the church path and pass the money back to the marchers again and we just had a full house on the Saturday night of people wanting floor space to sleep because it would be a church hall or a community centre would open up anywhere in Slough would open up their doors for the marchers to sleep, and um, one Saturday my husband came back from taking evensong on the Saturday night and someone opened the door and said there's no more room and he said [laughing] well actually I live here, that actually happened [laughing].

J: and um, what was the atmosphere like?

E: very happy, kitchen was full of people cooking, and eating I usually had a couple of chickens cooked and plenty of veg, you know, people would, lots of people had food on them, selves, it all worked.

J: and how did you feel as, sort of, one of the hosts on this march?

E: well, exhausted, busy, happy, I always loved people around me

J: and um were children, older children were they aware of...

[Elsie says she is not sure, Jessica would have to ask them, but they never 'made a fuss'. In retrospect Elsie thinks it was sometimes unfair on them to have them give up beds for others. But she has never talked about it with them.]

J: well I wanted to talk about this idea of the h-bomb... do you remember feeling as if an attack on Britain might be likely?

E: we thought that the the yeh, well I don't know about an actual attack but we felt that the uh offshoot of the bombs that were being prac, being um experimented with, would affect the whole atmosphere, which of course, when with Chernobyl later on was that eighty seven when the sheep were killed in wales we weren't wrong were we? [laughs]

J: so it was more about the the...

E: the effects the effects yeh

J: the pollution

E: yeh, yeh...

J: um in which case did you think about Russia and America, was that something that you talked about, the Cold War?

E: well I think we were aware of the hatred that was building up, so of course we joined what became known as the British Russian Friendship society, which had a group in Oxford, and um that resulted in visits later on to Russia, so I never I personally never had a hate about it because Russia had been our allies during the war so we were not prepared to countenance anything that would um count them as our enemy now.

J: and when did you join that group in Oxford, the friendship society?

[Elsie says it must have been in the 1970s, some voices from outside her front door.]

J: so um, obviously you were very worried the health effects but did you ever imagine um what life would be like if a bomb actually exploded near you?

E: oh yes, we knew it would be horrific because we'd seen the pictures of japan, and by this time various people we heard I couldn't name any of them or where it was, were coming over to talk, to groups, like, the british uh soviet not Russian the british soviet friendship society that was it, uh coming over and giving talks and they were so humble about it all it was really quite emotional, one particular man who was quite badly scarred but he'd survived the Hiroshima bomb, and um no we were just horrified at what it did to those two towns.

J: so you met that man?

E: yeh, well he came and addressed one of the meetings I can't remember now which one it was, but he came to oxford, mm.

J: and how did you feel when you actually kind of heard about...

E: ashamed of what our country had done... absolutely ashamed of what we'd done.

J: ok... ok, um any more stories about the pacifist movement, your involvement on the marches do you have much to...

E: how long have you got [laughs]?

J: we've got as long as you need [laughs], I feel like we're racing through [guest laughs]

E: what during that particular period

J: yeh, I'd like you to talk as much as you want about [laugh]

E: well of course the actual Aldermaston marches themselves didn't last all that number of years [there were 2 or 3 to London and the same back, then the women's peace camp began at Aldermaston. This received much attention. Elsie says there were more and more things happening to protest about, including Vietnam. She can't remember why they joined CND protests.] ... because there would be a reason someone they would try and make a break in well we never joined in any break-ins or anything we were always purely peaceful you know and uh I don't think my husband approved of that really, but we would always go and support, with the APF cross, so... no, is the answer to your question really, I haven't got any particular memories except that they were always wonderful occasions and very determined this was gonna be the last protest that we really were gonna shake the government, to its roots you know and get heard...

J: you mentioned there about some people committed criminal activity... were you worried at all about how people would perceive you and your husband as nuclear campaigners?

E: not particularly, I thought if that's their way of doing things that's up to them but, my husband well we yeh I say him really, he wasn't prepared to be in a position where he'd get arrested because he had a duty to his congregation and church, and that was his chief thing in life, his church and congregation [laughs].

J: um so did he ever worry about his job

E: well, he got into um, he had a few people uh queried what he was doing, you know, as a clergyman and that sort of thing [laughs]...

J: but it didn't stop him.

E: it didn't, no, no, no, he always held his own, yeh.

J: can you just tell me about... the moment that your husband realised he wanted to think about peace, um, during the war, you told me a story [referring to a conversation not recorded]

E: about the route march?

J: about your husband during the war, um, thinking about prayer.

[00:50:40]

[Elsie describes Sydney's training march, passing a lich gate of a church in Essex he read a motto on the gate saying 'may your feet enter the way of peace'. Another soldier said that they needed that – someone to guide their feet into the way of peace, and this made Sydney think carefully about why they were marching for war. Later when being trained on a bren gun, another religious play on words was made referring to the fact that Jesus Christ had never trained on a bren gun, once again highlighting to Sydney that war was not Christian. Subsequently a server chastised Sydney after a church service because he had not prayed for the enemy dead and the three stories became interlinked.]

J: what what was that story about praying for the enemy dead?

E: the server after the service in leigh-on-sea when they came back to the um vestry and he aid father you didn't pray for the enemy dead and my husband said well they'll have to wait for all soul's day and then the server said well that's not good enough and my husband thought no it isn't good enough is it and that was when he started reading up about the church's teaching on war and the just war.

J: did your husband talk much about his own experiences in the war later on in life?

E: no, very little, no, like a lot of them I believe... no, no... I think he had a terrible shock over the jumping over the rhine and he he wanted to forget it really, he didn't really keep in touch with uh you know, friends apart from one who was our oldest daughter's godfather who's disappeared off the scene completely, but he didn't keep in touch with them, he just got his head down to studying and becoming a priest [laughs].

[paused for break check].

J: um, ok, so going back to, the marches and the pacifist movement, um... are there any other moments in kind of wider international history that you remember really sparking your interest or, making you, concerned?

E: what later than?

J: anything

E: well, three visits to Russia in the Cold War convinced me that we were right to want to be friends with them, because we had such a wonderful time.

J: can you tell me about those visits?

[Elsie and Sydney went on the Thompson's tour, but once in Russia, they had a minder who they got permission from to miss some parts of the tour in order to visit their own church and peace movement contacts. There was a peace house in Moscow, which they went to and also a Russian church. They also had a Russian friend with a daughter in England to visit, as long as they could give the authorities addresses and stayed within border limits they were allowed to travel, although they did know they were being watched and minded.]... but we realised pretty soon that all the stories that were coming out about how people were not allowed to do this and that it was complete lies because the Russian church was completely open to anybody to go to, they were packed, well they don't have seats there wouldn't be room for seats you stand... [Elsie describes being offered a chair on her last visit because she looked frail, everyone was friendly and welcoming. Stories of soldiers stopping people from worshipping were false, in fact they were controlling crowds who wanted to enter churches] ... this was interpreted in the English press as soldiers not allowing people to go to church so we saw the other side of it and we knew it was lies, so our friendship with the Russians became even more um strong you know [laughs].

J: and that was in the nineteen eighties

E: eighties, yes, mm.

J: and what made you take that trip?

[Elsie describes how it started in the seventies, with Sydney being invited to a peace conference in Russia. Following that the APF asked him to continue similar trips anywhere that peace could be promoted. She tells a story about taking a hand-embroidered altar tapestry to Russia as a gift and how a Russian customs officer said it was beautiful when he saw it.] ... but always I was only here really with Sydney mainly to pack his bag, unpack it and look after him [laughs].

J: is that what you thought your role was?

E: yeh, yeh yeh...

[01:00:11]

E: that was my mission in uh, New Zealand, unpack and pack and look after the literature and see that we had food in the boot to make tea and coffee always caring [laughs]

J: and in the nineteen fifties as well as you said earlier...

E: well, all the time I've been like that.

J: but as well as caring, you also considered your place as a pacifist, would you say you did?

E: Not particularly deeply, I knew that that was the right thing to be, but I didn't read books and deep tomes about passivism, I just went along with it.

J: actually you mentioned about the newspapers, um, misreporting incidents in Russia... obviously in the nineteen fifties you hadn't been to Russia... but do you remember reading newspapers... about stories about Russia... do you remember wondering?

E: no, no not particularly no no, no... I didn't bring any great intellect to it at all, it was just that every time the situation that I found myself in, that I accommodated to if you can put it like that [laughs]

[Elsie speaks to her guest about coffee].

J: [pause] um, [pause] was there anything else you wanted to add about this time in terms of nuclear politics and belonging to the nuclear campaign and supporting your husband's work.

E: only every occasion was, always, a very happy occasion, lovely people we always met, uh, I was a great fan, still am, of Bruce Kent, uh, he's still [laughs] going strong, cos he could always put a good case over for everything you believed in even if you couldn't say it yourself, um, not really no.

[Another pause in the recording].

J: so I thought we could end the interview just with you telling me about um fostering children um how you became involved in that and also just a little bit about life in general at the end of the fifties...

E: um, on the first Sunday of our, new parish in slough in nineteen fifty eight a lady spoke to my husband after the service and said 'we're both new here, I've just moved in too' and she said 'I've got a problem' because she was what was known in those as a moral welfare worker looking after pregnant unmarried mothers whose families didn't want them to have the baby and it was her job to try and find a foster home or adoption for the babies, in slough we had a mother and baby home where the pregnant girls could go for six weeks before the birth and six weeks after and during that time this lady had to sort them out, but her problem was she had no office, she'd just moved into a flat with a lady she was a lodger and she hadn't got anywhere she could interview the girls so immediately my husband said 'oh don't worry come and use my study because I'm out visiting every evening in the parish so you can use my study' so she came to our house and set up her little office in our study and so the girls started coming into our parsonage, and that was how I first got involved with new babies because they had the babies and often their parents would come and either say oh perhaps we'll keep the baby and perhaps we won't because in those days it was a disgrace to be pregnant outside of marriage it was a real disgrace and so gradually I got involved with little babies and gradually we started being asked if we could foster one for a few weeks while the mother made other arrangements, and that was how the fostering started.

[01:04:57]

J: mm, how did you feel towards that idea of it being a disgrace, when you were helping?

E: well that's how it was.

J: but what was your opinion?

E: ... well I was sorry for the girls because I knew it could've been me, it could easily have been me [laughs]... but it was another one of those things that was accepted in those days that you didn't have babies outside of marriage, it's all changed now, thank goodness.

J: and um from that time on were you involved in fostering?

[Elsie describes how girls would come back a second time with another pregnancy, Elsie would look after the child. Another pregnant mother needed a home for herself, she moved in with Elsie and the family. Another West Indian baby came for six weeks but stayed for six years, subsequently going back to his mother, she is still in touch with both of them and Elsie describes how much she wishes to see him again as his second 'mom'. There was another girl who Elsie fostered who Elsie considers another daughter in Oxford. When Elsie's youngest son was nine, she decided she wanted to learn to drive and to do this she got a job in order to pay for it. Her job was in the Philosophy department at University of Oxford doing shorthand typing. She worked there for eleven years, and later started her own home-based typing business, she met many students who wanted their theses typed. She finished that business in 1990 when her and Sydney retired. She has many memories of PhD students and the relationships they formed. She remembers one Sudanese student in particular. She is still in touch with the Philosophy Department.]

J: was there anything else that you wanted to remember about family life in the fifties...?

E: Well it was very exciting in Slough because um, there was quite a bit of opposition to all the coloured people coming over and it was a a growing time of getting people to to integrate and it was nice to be involved with that time and of course with the church everybody was made welcome there and we had quite a lot of West Indians and Indian Christians in our congregation so they were happy times but as again and like Hilary said I was just doing all the time I was just being mum... you didn't really stop to think, you just got on with everything that needed doing.

J: and just to end do you remember anything about the Cuban missiles crisis?

E: the what?

J: the Cuban missiles crisis in nineteen sixty two.

E: oh yes, yeh, we protested about that, yes, yes, that was very worrying and that was that might have been when the British soviet friendship society formed because we were so sure that we that it was all going to blow up very very worried yes I think we were on a protest in London on that, that was sixty seven was it sometime?

J: sixty two

E: sixty two hm.

J: what do you remember about your feelings?

E: well, very very frightened, very frightened, having seen and known about the h-bombs and we really thought that uh, America was going to you know cause well it was America caused it wasn't it really, we were always thinking that the Russians were not the enemy, Mrs thatcher always wanted everybody to have an enemy you always had to have someone, and it was the Russians then wasn't it?

J: so your fear drove you to...

E: we're very fear, very frightened, yeh, very frightened, desperate to do anything in our power to stop it and the only way we knew was to protest, I expect my husband wrote letters I don't know I've probably got them

in the file [laugh] he was a great letter writer to the press but of course they didn't always gets printed.
[laughs]

J: ok I think we'll leave it there.

E: we'll stop there.

[Interview ends 01:11:33]