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PROFILE

PROFILE

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Margaret's Secret War

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Margaret Jackson was in on the birth of European unity. She talks to Michael Smith.

FOR OVER 50 YEARS Margaret Jackson lived with a secret. Only recently, since the lifting of a Foreign Office ban, has she been free to talk about her wartime service in the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the clandestine force set up in 1940 to wage guerrilla warfare in all the Nazi-occupied countries. She is one of the last surviving members of its headquarters staff in London, where she was secretary to its mainspring, Brigadier (later Major-General) Colin Gubbins.

This experience, and her work after the war with the organisation which administered US economic aid to Europe's devastated nations, left Jackson with a passion for European unity which still fires her in her 80s. She is distressed by the scepticism with which many in Britain view the European Commission, believing that they underestimate the miracle of reconciliation on which it was founded.

In 1940, three years after Margaret graduated in Modern Languages from London University, her elder sister, Anne, who worked in the War Office, heard that Gubbins was looking for a French-speaking secretary. Margaret got the job and that March joined Gubbins in Paris where he headed the mission set up to liaise with the resistance movements run by the Polish and Czech authorities in exile. When he was transferred to Norway, she remained in Paris, working for the acting head of the mission.

On 9 May, German armoured divisions broke through at Sedan and advanced rapidly across northern France. Paris was declared an 'open city' and the French government withdrew to Poitiers. Jackson and another secretary, Margaret Clayton, escaped back to London on a hospital ship which sailed from St Malo on 17 June carrying wounded British soldiers. The next day, an unknown Major, Charles de Gaulle, appealed to all French men and women to rally to him in London; and on 22 June the French government agreed to an armistice with Germany and surrendered.

Hope of freedom

Gubbins was now posted to train secret units of the Home Guard, in anticipation of a German invasion of Britain. Margaret Jackson continued as his secretary. They set up headquarters in a country house in Wiltshire, in whose stables recruits were trained in the use of Molotov Cocktails and other weapons against invading tanks, as the Battle of Britain raged in the skies over southern England.

The Special Operations Executive was charged by Churchill to 'set Europe ablaze' through sabotage and subversion. 'Gubbins saw SOE's role as part of the military strategy that would essentially give people in the occupied countries the hope of freedom,' says Jackson. Resistance, as patriots fighting on the Allied side, would 'restore their honour'.

The Secret Intelligence Service (better known as MI6) regarded SOE as amateurs. 'An action service was not seen as compatible with an intelligence service,' says Jackson. 'Whenever they had a disaster

they could lie low. But SOE agents had to make a resounding bang and expect either to get away or be captured and killed. The war for priorities within Whitehall was almost as fierce as the war against the Germans.'

Most SOE agents were refugees from the occupied countries, recruited by their own governments in exile. They were trained in Scotland, in such skills as parachute jumps, wireless telegraphy, the use of guns and explosives, unarmed combat and 'silent' killing. One of SOE's best-known sabotage operations was in Norway, where the destruction of the entire stock of heavy water at the Vemork hydroelectric plant led Germany to abandon research on the atom bomb.

SOE operated in Asia as well as Europe, and the risks faced by its agents—and by the resistance networks they supported—were huge. Of the 470 agents sent into France, for instance, around 200 were killed, most of them executed on Hitler's orders.

Jackson's role was to coordinate the secretaries' work. Security was paramount: papers had to be locked up or shredded every night. Gubbins was an inspiring boss, 'a man of integrity and energy, a born leader. Faces would brighten when he came in.'

Marshall Plan

Jackson's internationalism stemmed in part from her childhood in Argentina, where her father was Manager of the British Atlas Light and Power Company in Santa Fe. Her parents were members of the Church of Scotland and taught their four daughters 'to live their faith'. At the age of 12, Margaret was sent to school in England.

Her first job after university and secretarial college was in the typing pool of BBC radio news. The work was excruciating—'If you made a mistake you had to correct five carbon copies'. She moved on to the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House and followed its library to Oxford when it was evacuated at the outbreak of war. Then in March 1940, she joined Gubbins in Paris.

When SOE was disbanded in 1946, Jackson, aged 28, was awarded the MBE. She joined the Allied Commission for Austria in Vienna, as PA to Jack Nichols, the head of the British Political Division. The job involved taking minutes of the quadripartite meetings. It was the beginning of the Cold War and her experience there, and then at the Organisation of European Economic Co-operation (OEEC, now OECD) in Paris, gave her a keen sense of the ideological forces at work.

The OEEC, where Jackson was a deputy secretary of the council for nearly four years, implemented the Marshall Plan—'a most satisfying and thrilling sequel to the war'. Ministerial meetings were attended by such delegates as the British politician Hugh Gaitskell, the future UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and the French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann. She remembers those years as 'unforgettable'.

Returning to Britain in 1952, she spent a term at a Christian college. But she found the emphasis there too narrow and when Jack Nichols asked her if she wanted to do anything about the Cold War, she leapt at the idea. She joined Information Research, a new Foreign Office department, and four years later was posted to Melbourne, Australia, as an information officer.

There she met a family involved with Moral Re-Armament (MRA), the forerunner of Initiatives of Change. It was a period of industrial strife and class war among the dockside workers on whom Australia's international trade depended. She was intrigued to hear of diehard communists whose motives had been changed by contact with MRA. And she found herself rethinking her own values.

'I had centred my life on ambition, being admired, captivating people and doing my best to attract glamorous young men,' she says. She felt compelled to write a confessional letter home to her mother saying that she wasn't 'God's woman that she expected me to be'. Her honesty led to 'a wonderful sense of God's presence'.

Full of enthusiasm, she invited the wife of a visiting British politician to see an MRA film. He complained to the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, that the British Information Service in Melbourne had a 'political member of staff'. The UK High Commissioner in Canberra duly summoned Jackson and told her to break with MRA. She refused, on the grounds that her involvement was in her own time and at her own expense. The matter was dropped. However, later she resigned to return to Europe.

Anchor

Back in London, she took a succession of secretarial jobs, including nine years as PA to the Secretary

of the Malaysian Natural Rubber Producers Research Association, before retiring in 1978, aged 62.

It was just before the 'Winter of Discontent', when public sector workers went on strike and garbage stacked up in the streets. Inflation ran at around 20 per cent. Jackson plunged into local politics in Southwark, South London. She served as a Conservative councillor for eight years, building friendships and respect across the political divide, and became a member of the executive committee of the Southwark Race and Equality Council (SREC). In 2004, at a public ceremony in Southwark, the Mayor of London presented her with a certificate from the SREC 'in recognition of her life-long services to the Black and Ethnic Minority community in the London Borough of Southwark'.

Jackson now lives in a Methodist home in Croydon—her able mind as active as ever. She is glad her wartime recollections have found a home at London's Imperial War Museum. 'God has been my anchor through good times and bad ever since those days in Melbourne,' she says. 'Now my age and weaknesses bring home the power of prayer, and what it is to keep handing over the day to God.'