

Chapter 2

Origins: Worlds Colliding

The deep poverty of Wresinski's childhood convinced him that social justice could be achieved only by transforming relationships, specifically creating opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged people to think together with world leaders like the Secretary-General of the United Nations. A strength that made Mary a significant asset to ATD Fourth World was her ease at navigating very different social contexts. She drew this from mixed origins, with a bricklayer on her mother's



Mary as a baby with her parents

Provided courtesy of Duncan Rabagliati

side of the family and a member of Parliament on her father's. Anneke recalls: 'Mary's accent was so posh that meeting her mother was a big surprise for me. You could tell she had to struggle a lot. I think Mary didn't talk about her mother for the same reason that it's hard for me to talk about my father. He was from a lower class than my mum.'¹

Mary's father, Alexander Coultate Rabagliati, was a flight commander in the Royal Air Force. In 1940, the Battle of Britain raged for three months as the RAF tried to fend off large-scale attacks by Nazi Germany's *Luftwaffe*. Two days after the battle ended, he eloped with a chambermaid, Rhoda Bourgein (always called Sandra after her marriage). After hurried wedding vows, Alexander (nicknamed Sandy) had to rush back to duty. This left Sandra alone to travel into war-damaged London, summoned to meet her new mother-in-law for afternoon tea at one of the world's most luxurious hotels. The anxious bride arrived first to wait awkwardly among imposing marble columns. When Julia Rabagliati made her entrance, tea was served. Keen to make a good impression, Sandra immediately offered to pour, reaching for the milk. More than 70 years later, Margaret Rabagliati Wood, a niece of Sandra, recalls vividly how she recounted the occasion: 'There was an audible gasp, and my grandmother told her sharply, "Milk *after* tea". Aunt Sandy always told this story with much hilarity, laughing at having made such a lower-class error.'²

As an American, at this point, I needed explanation. In *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, we read: 'Putting the milk into the cup first is a lower-class habit.'³ I still couldn't understand the issue until I discovered in the *Dorchester Collection Magazine*: 'It became a sign of wealth to pour the milk in after the tea, as it demonstrated to guests that you could afford the best teacups.'⁴ Margaret continued:

Uncle Sandy was a family wild card, so no one was surprised he had gone and married someone considered 'other'. But Aunt Sandy was always very dignified under verbal assault or teasing, and she was also so sweet, funny, and wonderfully



Mary's
grandmother,
Julia Rabagliati

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Mary's mother,
Rhoda 'Sandra'
Bourgein

*Provided courtesy of Paul
de St Croix*



Mary's great great
grandmother,
Priscilla Bright
McLaren

*Provided courtesy of Duncan
Rabagliati*

warm that she won them all over. Everyone loved her, including my grandmother Julia. But at that afternoon tea, the potential was clearly there for total rejection.⁵

In Britain, even today, 'more often than not it matters crucially not only to whom one has been born, but where and in what circumstances one has grown up'.⁶ Seventy years ago, when those class distinctions were more rigidly entrenched, Mary's childhood was shaped by having family on both sides of the class divide. Among her Rabagliati ancestors were the renowned Scottish suffragist Priscilla Bright McLaren,⁷ Liberal parliamentarian Duncan McLaren, social reformers, prominent advocates of abolishing slavery, and pioneering medical practitioners. On the Bourgein side are a bankrupt shoemaker whose widow was forced to work as a laundress to support their children, a gardener whose wife also took in laundry, and a bricklayer turned shop-keeper and then coal hawker.

The bricklayer – Sandra's father – finally did well enough to purchase a back-street premises in Walthamstow and set himself up as a coal merchant. However, by the time Sandra was old enough to remember, her father was absent, fighting in the First World War. Her earliest years were spent in a single-parent household with her mother running the coal business and looking after

five children. After the war ended in 1918, years passed with no sign of Sandra's father. Her eldest brother believed his education was cut short because their father abandoned his family. In later years, Sandra wrote: 'I scarcely remember my father, who deserted us when I was very young. [We] were all brought up on this "let's hate dad" campaign, especially the girls, who were instructed that all men are evil liars and

rotters only out to have their way with women before leaving them.’⁸

Although life was tough, Sandra won a scholarship to the prestigious Walthamstow High School for full payment of fees and – as the daughter of an absent father – a maintenance grant. For perhaps for the first time in her life, Sandra mixed with daughters of the middle classes and learned to hold her own among them. When the Second World War broke out, she was 26 and working as a chambermaid at Ye Olde Thatched House in Epping. This happened to be the drinking den of choice for nearby RAF airmen like Sandy Rabagliati, who had already been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Shortly after their elopement, Sandy was given full command of 46 Squadron, which was soon assigned to the Middle East. With no idea when they would reunite, he and Sandra said their goodbyes. Although pilots and aircraft set sail for Egypt, plans had changed, as recorded the following day in Winston Churchill’s war diary: ‘The 24 Hurricanes should have departed today for Egypt along with fifteen others. However, Squadron Leader Sandy Rabagliati DFC has been informed that 46 is to remain in Malta to strengthen the island’s fighter force.’⁹ Not long after Sandy’s departure, Sandra found that she was expecting a child. Their daughter, Mary Catherine Rabagliati, was born in Guildford, on 12 January 1942. During Sandy’s year in the Mediterranean, his squadron destroyed eleven enemy aircraft and damaged seventeen more.¹⁰ On 31 October 1941 he was awarded a medal bar. At last in March 1942 came his long-awaited recall to Britain where he met his infant daughter for the first time. There followed several months of tactical work at HQ Fighter Command, after which he was appointed station commander



Sandra’s father,
Joseph Bourgein,
with his second
wife Louisa

*Provided courtesy of
Raymond Bourgein*



Mary’s father,
Alexander “Sandy”
Rabagliati

*Provided courtesy of
Duncan Rabagliati*



Sandy, sitting in the deck chair, at the RAF Hornchurch Station

Provided courtesy of Duncan Rabagliati



Sandy

*Provided courtesy of
Duncan Rabagliati*

at RAF Fairwood Common in Wales, where Sandra and Mary joined him to begin life together as a family. In May 1943, Sandy was appointed wing leader at RAF Coltishall and the family relocated to Norfolk. Two months later on 6 July 1943, Sandy flew out of RAF Ludham, leading seven Typhoons on a shipping strike. Sixty miles from home he reported mechanical problems. He was seen to be climbing, smoke streaming from the engine, before descending and crashing into the sea. A massive search was launched, monitored by Sandy's brother Francis Rabagliati, also based

at Coltishall with an air-sea rescue squadron. But no trace was found. Alexander Rabagliati's death, at age 29, is commemorated on the Runnymede Air Forces Memorial, near Egham in Surrey.

When he was declared 'missing presumed killed', Sandra was left with an 18-month-old daughter, a small pension, and no fixed abode, having moved from airfield to airfield. Friends and Rabagliati relatives rallied round; but Sandra was uncomfortable with imposing too long upon their generosity. Margaret Bourgein, a niece of Sandra's (who called her by her birth name, Rhoda) reflects on the vast class differences between the Bourgeins and the Rabagliatis.



Mary with her father

Provided courtesy of Duncan Rabagliati

Remembering childhood visits to her grandmother (Sandra's mother), Margaret writes:

Her demeanour was that of a poor old woman, like a character in a Grimms' story. Our visits seemed like a duty, to deliver coal, food and money, which I am sure was for rent. Maybe the disparities of social class had a huge bearing on family relationships. I empathise with Rhoda; it must have been difficult to reconcile her home life and



Sandra with Mary
and Sandy

*Provided courtesy
of Paul de St Croix*



Mary with her father

*Provided courtesy of
Paul de St Croix*



Sandra's mother, Marion Bourgein née Willson

Provided courtesy of Peter Akehurst

family circumstances, with that 'outside'; trying to keep the two separate. This in turn must have affected Mary. I think my father too, was both at the same time, trying to leave his 'working class' roots behind and become something better, as he saw it. On reflection, my brother and I feel as though we lived in a precarious kind of parallel universe, our 'home' and the world outside.¹¹

To remain independent of her in-laws, Sandra looked for a child-friendly residential position. A friend urged her to apply for a job that was about to become vacant: the position of custodian at Chequers, the country seat of the Prime Minister. Although still numb with grief, she allowed herself to be persuaded and was invited for a weekend that included being vetted over sherry by Churchill's daughters. Sandra was also summoned by the great man himself for a viewing of 'The Four Feathers'. By then, however, she had decided that Chequers was not a suitable environment for her to raise her small child, so she was not disappointed to hear the next day that she would not be offered the position because 'I



Sandra

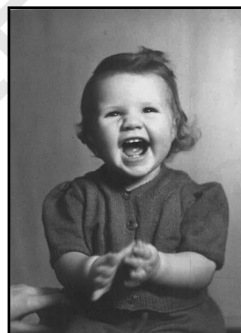
*Provided courtesy
of Paul de St Croix*

was too young, too attractive – and also my foreign name, Rabagliati, could rouse suspicion among the natives!’¹²

Sandra eventually found a more suitable position at the Central Hotel in Royal Tunbridge Wells, a spa town in Kent. As for Mary, described as a child with ‘lovely red-gold hair’,¹³ while her mother was working, she spent hours on end ‘helping’ in the hotel kitchen or being ‘kept an eye on’ by off-duty staff – and becoming thoroughly spoilt in the process. Mary recalled:

Once Mummy went up to London for a day and I was left in the charge of a girl called Bertha. I told Bertha I was going downstairs to stir the soup, as the staff allowed me to ‘help’. But instead, I walked out the front door and virtually ‘ran away’ for a few hours. I walked a couple hundred yards away from the hotel until I found a taxi-man. I asked him to take me for a ride, which to my disappointment he refused to do, as I had no money. Whilst I was pleading, a lady came up and offered to take me to her home for tea. I accepted, and off we went. Luckily, the lady’s kindness was genuine and I was not kidnapped or suffered any ill treatment – as I could quite easily have. Instead, I was given a wonderful tea, and afterwards she took me round her garden and gave me a strawberry plant, which afterwards gave at least three strawberries.

All this time, poor Bertha must have been driven nearly mad with worry over her charge who had completely forgotten her. When I was finally brought home, we found Bertha in the act of ringing the police. Her relief must have been enormous, for she was hardly cross with me at all.¹⁴



Mary

*Provided courtesy
of Paul de St Croix*

When the time came for Mary to attend primary school, she found it hard to adapt to the unfamiliar world of structure and rules. Looking back, Mary freely acknowledged that she had been a problem child; but she also retained troubling memories of ‘dreadful scenes’ and



Mary

Provided courtesy of Paul de St Croix



Sandra

*Provided courtesy
of Paul de St Croix*

frightening punishments, such as being locked in a shed for straying into a forbidden part of the garden. 'I have never forgotten it, for I was so frightened that I would never see my family again and would be forgotten forever.'¹⁵

Mary's hatred of the local school only increased with time, and she was also becoming finicky about her food. Sandy's aunt Catherine Rabagliati, known as Catrine, grew concerned, and offered to pay for boarding school. Because of their lack of a proper home and her long working hours, Sandra reluctantly accepted the offer, and Catrine organised a place for Mary at Moira House School in Eastbourne.¹⁶ Looking back, Mary wrote, 'At first I was terribly unhappy at having to leave Mummy, and Mummy was probably quite worried about me too. But boarding school did me a world of good.' Mary also spent more time with her Rabagliati relatives during school holidays, especially her great-aunt Catrine, who was a politician. When Mary was 12, Catrine was elected mayor of the Metropolitan Borough of Paddington, making her the first female mayor of a London borough.

Sandra, meanwhile, joined Tunbridge Wells Squash Club where she met Victor de St Croix, a manager for British Belting and Asbestos. They married on 25 August 1950 and moved to Guildford. Victor had two sons from a previous marriage, 13-year-old John and 12-year-old