

REBELLIOUS SOUNDS

Dreadnought South West: Rebellious Sounds Interview with Elizabeth Sigmund

Elizabeth Sigmund has spent many years as an environmental activist, campaigning against research into and production of chemical and biological weapons, and nerve agents, as well as the use of organophosphates in sheep dip. She has won numerous awards for her work, and in 2001 she was named an Honorary Doctor of Science by Plymouth University.

When my father left us, my mother and I went to live with my grandparents in Bolton. My grandfather and three of his sons had been in World War 1, and were very seriously affected by gas attacks. My grandfather's kidneys were badly affected, and his youngest son went to war and died of mustard gas poisoning a few years after the war. I grew up with a feeling of horror at the thought of gas, and when I read Wilfred Owen's poem and saw photos of people in long lines being led away because they were blinded or injured, it stuck in my mind – the horror that human beings could use things like that against each other.

In 1967 I heard a radio programme called "Make a Desolation and Call it Peace", which was based on an international conference on chemical and biological weapons that had been held in London, organised by the Brunel Peace Library. It was quite clear from what the society and doctors were saying that there needed to be a grassroots movement to campaign against such things. There wasn't one, so I just took the bit between my teeth and wrote a letter to the *Observer* as follows: 'Would any reader interested in an attempt to press the government to consider a renunciation of the research and stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons contact me with the object of assessing the amount of concern among responsible people on this subject. This is a non-political attempt and if the response is encouraging, it could form the basis for a countrywide petition.' And the answers came pouring in! My daughter Meg and I made great lists of them, and we wrote a petition, which was suitably worded, and sent it several times to the government, but no acknowledgment was ever received.

The huge response to the letter in the *Observer* proved that there was concern, but no one had previously taken the steps needed to pull it all together. Soon after I was invited to Plymouth to appear on BBC television, and in May 1968 I was invited to London to meet a group of people from various peace organisations to form an anti-chemical/biological warfare group. The meeting was televised and reported in several papers, and I realised that people did care and we could become a voice for an otherwise unrepresented section of society.

Up to that point I'd never done any public speaking, and subsequently I've spoken in the House of Commons Grand Committee room, at public meetings – I've become quite used to it.

In terms of networks, I had a lot of support from journalists, particularly Anthony Tucker from *The Guardian* and Piers Wright from *The Times*. They were both very supportive of me, and they came down to my little cottage in Devon and became my friends, which was wonderful. Then of course other people began to come forward and when I had the support of scientists and doctors, it just grew.

It was very important to the campaign that I had science on my side. I was supported in that by the chairman of the anti-chemical weapons group, professor Alastair Hay, who still works

at Leeds University. Professor Julian Perry Robinson, at Sussex University, has also done a huge amount internationally to make all these facts known. I just learnt as I went along.

I then discovered that various scientists had been doing research into organophosphates in sheep dip, one of whom is Dr Sarah Mackenzie Ross, a neurologist in London. I also had a great deal of help from the veterinary medicine committee too. They were rather reluctant to admit it at first, but they did eventually come around to admitting that the nerve agents in chemical and biological weapons were closely related to the OP pesticides that are used in sheep dip. In fact, the health and safety executive had published a paper, which contained confirmation of everything we were saying about the dangers of OP sheep dip.

During the campaign I encountered opposition but they didn't come out and challenge directly, rather it was implied that because I was a mother of five I wasn't scientifically aware. And gradually they began to admit that the things we were saying were right. There is a leaflet, Guidance Notes MS17 from the Health and Safety Executive, called Biological Monitoring of Workers Exposed to OP Pesticides, and it says everything that we needed to know, admitting that the things we'd been saying were true. It was extraordinary because an officer from the HSE from Plymouth gave it to one of my committee and said, 'Don't ever tell anyone where you got this or I shall lose my job and my pension,' but of course we copied it and sent it to all the farmers and scientists, and really they hadn't a leg to stand on. The biological effects... it was absolutely clear.

We had a database of 800 farmers on our list, and we couldn't have done all this without the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which gave us a grant to keep working so we could manage our postage and to keep on having meetings. People had heard about me because these journalists had reported what we were doing, and they read in the papers what I was up to, and they wrote to me.

Although some of the opposition focused on the fact that I was a woman, it was only a small part of their campaign. Most people didn't care at all that I was a woman. In fact, it helped me I think, the fact that there was repeatedly this headline, 'mother of five protests about chemical weapons' ... it was definitely a plus, and people thought it was rather touching.

In terms of environmental activism, I don't see a gender split; I think this is a thing which human beings care about. It's very common. People are now fully aware that these things are very dangerous and they won't use them any more.

Before I heard the talk on the radio, I'd never thought of doing anything like this before. It was not something in my family. My mother was a very quiet and gentle person, and she was amazed that I got involved, and very proud – she said, 'you're like Florence Nightingale!' But no, my family were very much, I have to say, not supporters of women's intellect, they thought women should be quiet and meek, and keep out of things, but they weren't nasty to me. At school I was very quiet and very embarrassed at speaking in public, answering questions, so although I did go to a grammar, a good one in Bolton in Lancashire, but I had no history of doing anything that can be called activism. It was the talk on the radio – it seemed to me it encapsulated what I wanted to say. I learnt as I went along.

Grassroots campaigns are terribly important, but the trouble is that nowadays the issues that are most important are not to do with our own politics but to do with the rest of the world, and I think we have a tremendous part to play in letting the government know that we don't

approve of things. I think that presenting petitions to Downing Street and the House of Commons are very important things to do.

I suppose my form of activism is a moderate but insistent sort of activism. It had no political bias because that would have been non-productive to the situation. It was important to say that it was a non-political attempt and that's why we got support right across the board.

I think that what the suffragettes were doing... I'm not in support of ruining paintings or window smashing, or falling in front of horses, but I have great sympathy with people who do. I would be classified as a moderate, I think.

My piece of advice to pass on would be to first of all learn to listen very carefully to what you're being told about various things, and to question anything that you have no proof of; question everything that you're told in light of what you learn from scientists, and I think it's very important that women hold fast to what they actually believe in. Call it your inner voice, if you like... You may feel very timid at first, but it does develop as you go on. Get a solid scientific base for what you're saying, consult the scientists of whatever gender, and go from there.

In the beginning there was nobody supporting me, except the people who wrote to me. I felt that I was very much a lone voice at the beginning, but it did work out. I was then married to somebody who was very cynical and didn't expect me to do anything like this, and was furious when the newspapers sent a woman down to photograph me and not him, as a writer, so that was my opposition! But then I didn't care at all what he thought about things because he was very cynical and certainly my uncles didn't approve of what I was doing either, even though they knew perfectly well that I was quite right. I was rather amazed that I found I had these abilities.

I rather believe in one's birth sign. I'm a Cancerian, and I care very much about people's welfare and the underdog – I always want to support the underdog. But I also have Mars rising, which means I'm a battler, and I think that's true.

I keep a very close watch on what's happening with the environment. I find people are campaigning against wind farms and solar farms, and think that's a pity because we've got to have energy from somewhere. Global warming is very real, and it is our fault, and I would support anyone who's working in that sphere. I am now getting to the age where I'm not involved directly in anything, but in my conversations with friends and others, our future and that of our planet is what I'm talking about.