

William Maxwell Cordell

1922 - 2014

Bill was born in Chiswick in London in 1922. His parents were Emanuel and Hinda and he had two older sisters Joyce and Doreen. Bill was very close to his father, but Emanuel died when Bill was just ten years old, which was a real blow for him.

The family lived with Hinda's mother. It was a very musical upbringing – Hinda and her sisters were all professional musicians, and had appeared in the film "Brief Encounter" as the trio playing in the background in the café. Hinda, who took on her husband's job in a furniture firm after he died, eventually made the piano her profession – accompanying silent films and for many years playing for the Royal Ballet School. From this background Bill acquired a lifelong love of music, although he never had any pretensions to be a musician.

Bill studied at the Latimer School in Chiswick and, as a member of a Jewish family he was also expected to attend religious classes. But at the age of 15 he started to challenge the ideas that he was being presented with and became an atheist. He left school at 16, which was very much the norm in the thirties, and went to work in a shipping office in London. During his late teens his political ideas developed and he joined the Communist Party.

When the war began Bill tried to join the navy but failed the breathing tests when he passed out trying to blow into a tube. This was a great disappointment at the time as many of his friends were joining the navy. Sadly, very few of them survived the war, so perhaps his breathing problems were a blessing in disguise. Instead Bill joined the army but, because of his communist sympathies, he was kept away from the main theatres of action. He was stationed in Shetland as a radar technician where, for the first few months, he shared his posting with eight women. He described this as one of the most harrowing times of his life. Later on other men were sent up to Shetland, most of whom were being kept out of the way because of their left wing sympathies, and for the remainder of the war they had a whale of a time. A number of friendships were forged during this period, and in particular there was Jig who became a lifelong friend.

Bill was very close to his sisters. When Joyce, was widowed very young with a small child, and he gave her a lot of support. On one occasion he and Jig went AWOL and travelled down to London to see Joyce. On their return to Shetland they were locked up as a punishment, but the trip must have been worth it because Jig and Joyce married some years later.

When the war finished Bill returned to London and went to work in the finance department of a tea importers near London Bridge. He met Sylvia deSmith at a socialist dance and they discovered that they shared a number of unconventional attitudes to life. They married in 1948 and

rented a flat in Portobello, before buying a little house in Kenton where their daughters, Alison and Julia, were born.

During the early years of his marriage Bill went into business with a friend, setting up an antiques renovation and retail business in Westbourne Grove. He worked in the antiques business for the rest of his life, eventually setting up on his own with a shop near Marble Arch. Sylvia helped out in the business and Bill would travel to France – flying with their van from Lydd to Le Touquet – to collect clocks, chandeliers and candelabra that could be refurbished for sale either through the shop or to stores such as Harrods. On one occasion the van had to be offloaded from the plane because it was too heavy to travel due to the amount of goods that Bill had purchased.

At home Bill was actively involved with his children as they were growing up, a sensitive man, who was in touch with his feelings and who frequently played the role of peacemaker in what was again an all-female household. He and Sylvia had a traditional and close knit relationship and he would spend time in the garden whilst she produced wonderful food in the kitchen. Weekend lunches would be accompanied by “Any Questions” on the Home Service and discussions about the politics and the state of the world, and followed by walks on Hampstead Heath. Family holidays were often spent at Swanage – Bill loved the Dorset countryside - and later travelling to Europe.

Bill’s daughter Julia suffered with mental health problems and Bill was always ready to challenge the status quo and ask important questions about the quality of care she received. After he retired he was instrumental in setting the Camden Mental Health Consortium that enabled patients and their families to be actively consulted and involved in the planning and delivery of care. Although this is now accepted practice at the time this was a completely new idea and the Consortium in Camden was one of the first in the country. Bill continued to play an active role in the Consortium and in the Camden branch of Mind.

Bill and Sylvia enjoyed travelling and would have a couple of foreign holidays a year. They visited various countries in Europe – with a particular fondness for Greece – and also travelled further afield to Russia, China, India and South Africa. Bill found the different cultures fascinating and must have been the bane of the tour guide’s life, because he was always the one that asked the awkward questions.

Bill was a supportive and loyal husband and cared for Sylvia at home during the last seven years of her life, when she suffered with severe dementia. After her death he moved to Somerset to be close to Alison and Denton, and although it was a massive change after having lived in London for so long he settled in well and made a new life for himself. He joined the U3A in Cheddar where he enjoyed Bridge and Philosophy classes and made a number of good friends. He also enjoyed being a grandfather to Caz and a great-grandfather to her children. Denton told

me that he couldn't have asked for a better father-in-law and friend – with Bill's death, he said, the world has lost a good man.

Bill remained fit and active until he became ill earlier this year. He was very accepting of his approaching death, feeling that he had had a good life and that it was now his time to go. The only regret that he expressed about his illness was that he was no longer able to enjoy a glass of good, red wine. He had a short spell in hospital during the summer but was able to return home with support from his family and carers. He died at home, as he had wished to do.

We are now going to hear from two people who knew Bill – firstly his niece Anna Reisenberger.

Anna's Tribute

"I wanted to share with you some of my personal feelings about Bill, but I am also speaking for my sister, brother and both my sons, for whom he was a very special person too.

Bill knew me all my life, as Sylvia was my father's only sibling, and they were there for us children at critical times, like taking us on holiday when my parents were in Australia or looking after us when my sister had a road accident. They were unfailingly generous and when I had young children of my own and couldn't afford proper holidays, and lent us their cottage in Dorset and their caravan in France. Bill always found children fascinating and one of his chief delights when he came to Somerset, was watching his great grandchildren children grow up. He recently told me that he worked out children's personalities from an early age. For example, one day he was pushing me across the park in my pram and I cried out "come back Jane, come back!" to my sister who was running away - and she's the one who has been sailing around the world for the last 25 years.

But being here did mean I got to know Bill better over the years. It took me time to realise how exceptional he was because he was such self-deprecating person. He never studied at university, but could hold his own with anyone who did, and I know that my father, who was a university professor, really rated Bill's judgement - and like many others, made Bill his executor. Bill was interested in everyone and everything and was both sharp-witted and open-minded. Bill had travelled widely, including Russia and China, and his interest in the outside world did not wane. He always wanted to discuss contemporary politics with me, and, unusually, continued to be left-wing right into old age - although not quite as far left as he was in his youth.

All that might make Bill sound rather serious, but I'm sure that everyone here knows that he was warm-hearted and fun to be with. In fact he had an impish streak and liked to tease both adults and children. He liked to lob an awkward question into a conversation when you were least expecting it, particularly in group situations, just to see people's reactions. He did it at the old people's support group he attended in London after Sylvia died, and also at the U3A philosophy class down here, which he also enjoyed tremendously. In fact Bill enjoyed many things, classical music of course, but also modern theatre, delicious food - going out to his favourite local restaurants was a priority in London - and gardening. He spent 30 years developing a beautiful garden in London, but equally got a huge amount of pleasure from his little garden in Cross. He was still improving it this summer. He phoned me to confess he had started hacking away at it while Alison and Denton were away briefly. He said "I know I shouldn't have done it, but it made me feel great - mind you all that hard work nearly killed me!" (I'm sure it didn't).

Bill was a devoted and uncomplaining carer for Sylvia for many years, and he also fought hard, both as a parent, and as Chair of Mind in Camden, to ensure that his daughter Julia got the high quality of care that both she and others needed. So it is fitting that, thanks to Alison and Denton, he was able to move down to Cross when he needed more care and support, but was still able to maintain his (dare I say it) "stubborn" independence. He loved having the family nearby, and the kindness and warmth that people in Cross showed him, and all the new friends he made here as well as the visits from old friends and relations.

I know that Bill has had an unforgettable impact on many people - he was so modest, and yet such a remarkable person - and I will miss him because I loved him not just as my uncle but also as a really good friend."

Caz Simms will now speak about Bill as a grandfather and great-grandfather.

Caz's Tribute

"I first met Bill 7 years and 6 months ago. It was the day he was burying his wife Sylvia of 58 years.

It was around 2pm and he came straight up to me and wanted to know all about me..... I suggested another time as maybe today was more about him, not me.

Little did I know that this was Bill's way.

Our friendship and love grew quickly and we soon discovered a mutual understanding of the importance of chatting, something he did very well.

I loved my relationship with Bill, he would tell me about his childhood and growing up in Chiswick and he would talk about his family, and when Ali and Denton were being, well Ali and Denton he would roll his eyes at me and i would wink at him.

He had such a lively mind, I once said to him that "he's so random" and he leant forward looked me right in the eye and said "I know"

He embraced me and my children with open arms and only recently said to me that he really didn't expect at this time of his life to be surrounded by so many young people.

I loved Bill's mind, I know he used to worry and I know he used to battle the dark beast of depression; something that we both shared, but he wasn't afraid to talk about it, and one of the things he taught me ...
Was that mental health should be talked about and that it is an illness not a weakness and not something to feel ashamed about, thereby making it worse.

Bill was always so kind, patient and chatty with me and I loved being with him and near the end holding his hand or stroking his forehead and listening ,
and when he couldn't talk anymore, we just shared the silence.

My Granddad was my favourite Granddad and I was his favourite Granddaughter and we would often introduce each other as such, and maybe or maybe not we would explain that I was his only Grandchild and he my only Granddad."