

Donald Hutchison: An unusual man

'A Cherry Dress' by Peter Bild and Irene Messinger (eds.), (V&R unipress, Göttingen, 2018, €40).

The convoluted and mysterious life of British volunteer Donald Gabriel Hutchison Douglas (1915-1981) is told in this newly published book about his first wife, Anita Bild, a Jewish refugee from Vienna whom he married five days before the outbreak of the Second World War. Donald (pictured right) was gay, but wedlock saved Anita from deportation to Europe and Nazi persecution.

His story is told by Dr Katharine Campbell, who in an aptly titled chapter, 'An Unusual Man', gives an

intriguing overview of her uncle's shadowy life. There is more to come, Katharine has told the IBMT, as she is also working on a full biography of the family member who was one of the first Britons to volunteer to fight the fascists following Franco's military revolt in the summer of 1936. She hopes to include some 'juicier details' of a life that took Uncle Donald from London to Madrid, Berlin, Warsaw and Geneva.

Born in Ilfracombe, Devon, Donald arrived in Spain in August 1936. His studies at Cambridge University had been cut short. He was already a communist with an anti-fascist record, having been arrested in December 1933 at a

protest against Hitler outside the German embassy in London and jailed for one month. From then on his movements and activities were monitored by the British secret services.

In Spain he was known as Donald Hutchison. In 'Boadilla' Esmond Romilly remembers 'Dan' as a 'cheerful and good-natured' Londoner. He first flew as a machine-gunner in the Republic's airforce, before transferring to the Thälmann Battalion, when he suffered a serious hand injury in fighting in the Casa de Campo, Madrid, in December 1936.

Coincidentally, his injured hand was dressed by Austrian communist



volunteer Renée Durrmeyer, a cousin of his wife-to-be, Anita Bild.

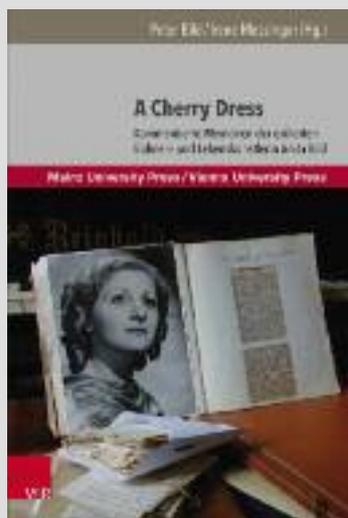
Following a brief stay in England, Donald returned to Spain in July 1937 and worked with Jim Ruskin in the signals section of the British Battalion, before being repatriated in May 1938. In London

he worked for the Czechoslovak Refugee Trust, while raising funds for Republican Spain.

During the Second World War he served briefly in the RAF but was forced to leave, possibly because of his Communist Party membership. Then, as a merchant navy deckhand, he was suspected by the British secret services to be acting as a communist courier.

The war over, Donald pops up in Berlin in 1946, while en route to Warsaw. In the occupied German city he is arrested in mysterious circumstances and only released following an appeal to his brother, who happened to be the military governor of the British Zone.

His links in London to the pro-communist Friends of Democratic Poland had already attracted the attention of MI5. Once in Poland



he works for various German and Polish communist publications and applies to become a Polish citizen.

But, as his niece recounts, the Polish authorities were suspicious. 'In his interview for citizenship,

Donald had cited the benefits of the communist system in Poland, and his disillusionment with the Labour government in Britain that had "begun, step by step, to submit its foreign policy, defence plans and its economic policy to the United States, that is, to a small group of multimillionaires' families who rule the United States".'

However, with 'typical paranoia', writes Katharine Campbell, the Polish state security service mistrusted him, saying he was very articulate in using communist vocabulary, but they were unsure of his intentions. He was suspected of spying partly due to his contacts with George Scott, the British Consul in Katowice.

Distrusted by both sides in the Cold War, Donald left Poland in December 1951. After interludes in

France and England, in 1960 he eventually settles in Geneva, making a living as a freelance interpreter with the United Nations. There he lived for the rest of his life, bringing up two adopted Ethiopian brothers, Girma and Moges. He married briefly again in 1975, this time to an American woman wanting residency in the UK.

In 2014, Katharine managed to track down her adopted African cousins. One is now a corporate jet pilot, the other an economist with the International Labour Organisation. They both recalled that Donald spoke to them about two things in particular: Poland and the Spanish Civil War – underlining yet again the powerful and lasting impact that the Spanish Civil War had on so many lives.

JIM JUMP