

# Letter: BBC program looks at the life of blacklisted actor Sam Wanamaker

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Not long after your article appeared on the upcoming performance of Trevor Griffiths' new play *A New World: A Life of Thomas Paine* at the Globe Theatre, London, I watched an edition of "Who Do You Think You Are?" on BBC 1 television, on February 28, about the history of the Wanamaker family, in particular, Sam Wanamaker, who "founded what was to become the Shakespeare Globe Trust, dedicated to the reconstruction of the theatre and the creation of an education centre and permanent exhibition."

This BBC series of programs features celebrities who research their family histories with the aid of genealogists and other specialists. It usually gives fascinating glimpses into history, which often have political implications for today.

This edition centred around the actress Zoe Wanamaker, daughter of Sam Wanamaker, 1919-1993. The Globe theatre was his brainchild for 20 years; unfortunately, he died before it was opened.

Before doing this program, Zoe Wanamaker only knew snippets of her family history. She was born in New York, but when she was three her father, an American actor, director and producer, fled to the UK to escape the anti-communist McCarthyite witch-hunts. (Her mother, a radio soap star, was born in Toronto).

In the program Zoe first goes to the FBI headquarters in Washington DC and here, under the Freedom of Information Act, gains access to her father's FBI file, an extraordinary document that reveals the level of scrutiny Sam was under.

Sam grew up in the Depression; in 1936 he won a scholarship to drama school. He joined the American Communist Party in 1943. While playing a Russian soldier in a play, *Counterattack*, at the National Theatre in Washington, DC, in 1943, he became interested in the Soviet Union and the possibilities of socialism. At end of the Second World War Sam became disillusioned and left the party mainly because of his opposition to the stifling effect of Stalinist party-line thinking on artists in the United States.

After producing, directing, and acting in several Broadway plays, he moved to Hollywood in 1947 where he directed and acted in a clutch of films. But the development of the Cold War and anti-communism after 1947 led to the witch-hunting of suspected communists by McCarthyism.

The FBI file on Sam Wanamaker which Zoe is allowed to see—and take a copy of—had the names of FBI agents and informants, including

fellow actors, blacked out. Zoe was shocked at the way the state had recorded her father's political activities. The files revealed Sam's links to campaigning organizations which the FBI regarded as subversive, including even a professional organization like the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions.

The McCarthyite investigation into communist influence in Hollywood began with the first round of Hollywood House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings in October 1947. Big stars like Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, along with Sam Wanamaker and others, staged a protest against the hearings as an attack on free speech.

A group of writers and actors known as the Hollywood Ten refused to answer questions at the hearings and were imprisoned. In an increasingly intimidating atmosphere Bogart and Bacall retreated from the protests, but Wanamaker remained steadfast and outspoken.

In 1950 an anti-communist tract entitled "Red Channels," reporting Communist influence in television and radio, listed Wanamaker as a Communist, effectively blacklisting him and putting his career in jeopardy. Sam continued to be politically active. In 1951 he made a speech welcoming two of the Hollywood Ten on their release from prison.

The FBI files revealed that Sam was about to be called as a witness before HUAC. Instead of betraying his fellow artists or facing the threat of a possible jail sentence, Wanamaker apparently decided to leave the United States and go live in Britain.

Later when Zoe was asking her father's advice on performing in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (a play which deals metaphorically with the witch-hunt), Sam told her he felt guilty about not staying in the States and fighting the witch-hunt.

The FBI files reveal he was still under their surveillance in the UK up to the 1960s. Zoe shows the files to Professor Martin Sherman, an expert on the McCarthy era. He explained that the FBI would have seen the various groups with which Sam was involved as front organizations for the Communist Party, even though they may have only been promoting social justice; the ruling class saw this as dangerous and radical in the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s. Wanamaker was on a security index of people to be rounded up in the event of war with the Soviet Union.

At the end of this section of the program Zoe expresses her pride in her father: "The principles that my father had were that mankind

should treat each other fairly and equally; in that sense I'm extremely proud."

Zoe then investigates her grandfather Maurice's arrival in Chicago from Russia in the early 1900s, when that city was undergoing rapid economic growth and thousands of immigrants came from Europe hoping to build new lives.

Zoe discovers documents listing Maurice as Maines Watenmaker and as Jewish, born 1895. Passenger lists show he arrived in April, 1910 in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, having sailed from Antwerp three weeks previously. His family accompanied him, including Zoe's great grandparents, Meier and Gittel; the family were all tailors from Nikolayev in what is now Ukraine. On landing, the entire family had to be hospitalised, probably from the long voyage and were eventually allowed to stay in the country.

They then travelled to Chicago which was the third largest Jewish city in the world at the time, with nearly one quarter of a million Jewish inhabitants. One of Zoe's relatives gives her a copy of Maurice's own typed life history in which he expresses his optimism on arriving in America, "the Golden land of Freedom."

But two weeks after arriving in Chicago, Maurice's mother Gittel died suddenly of heart disease and the family was devastated. Zoe goes to the Waldheim cemetery in Chicago and finds Gittel was buried in May 1910 in the charity section, the equivalent of a pauper's grave (for poor people with no money).

Within a few months of his mother's death, Maurice was involved in a strike in the tailoring industry which lasted 22 weeks from September 1910 to February 1911.

Labour historian Geoff Hellgesson said the strike "shook the city to its core." It started at Hart, Schaffner & Marx over a pay-cut leading to a spontaneous walkout; this became the spark for a general strike involving 41,000 garment workers."

Employers had been exploiting the flood of immigrants by cutting wages; they could sack one "greenhorn" if they didn't like their low pay and easily take on another one. The garment workshops deserved to be called sweatshops and the pay was so meagre the workers had to take work home just to make ends meet.

Baton-wielding police on horseback charged into the strikers as they marched through the main garment industry area—which is now the business centre of Chicago.

The garment workers had no union but won support from the powerful Chicago Federation of Labour, which provided food vouchers and tried to foist an agreement on to the strikers. But the garment workers rejected the agreement and the union withdrew its support, refusing food to the strikers in December 1910. One female garment worker died of starvation. Reluctantly the workers returned to work in February without most of their demands being met.

In the aftermath of the strike the garment workers formed their own union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in 1914, which went on to help regulate the industry. Maurice was instrumental in

organising the clothing workers in Chicago as an "inside guard" or shop steward, and later became a socialist.

Zoe then visits Nikolayev near the Black Sea in southern Ukraine. In the early 1900s, under the Czarist regime, this was part of the Pale of Settlement area in which all Jews were forced to live. Within the Pale, Jews were forbidden from settling in the countryside, so they lived in cities. For Jews education and employment was restricted, they worked as petty traders or semi-skilled artisans and lived in poverty.

(In the Soviet Union Nikolayev was a centre of shipbuilding and was closed to foreigners to protect its naval secrets).

Zoe visits the local archives and finds that Maurice was born in 1895, Maines Watmakher. The Jews lived in Moscow Street and the surrounding area in dilapidated houses and basements. They lived close together in fear of pogroms. A deadly wave of pogroms started in 1903 in the area around Nikolayev; the year of the revolution of 1905 was also accompanied by pogroms leaving thousands of Jews dead or wounded. After the pogrom of 1905 in Nikolayev the city's Jews started to leave for the US and Canada hoping for a better life.

In 1907 Maurice's brother Nathan left for America and Maurice and the rest of the family (parents and sisters) followed in 1910.

Zoe sees a natural progression from Maurice's early experiences of poverty and injustice in Nikolayev to his later socialist beliefs, which he passed on to Sam. However, this program as a whole showed that it was the social inequality, exploitation and oppression under American capitalism which really shaped their beliefs.

The program can be viewed at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/whodoyouthinkyouare/new-stories/zoe-wanamaker/index.shtml>

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