

The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

Information Sheet Number 10

Revised December 2018

Wodehouse's Actions During the War – Put In Context

There has been so much distortion of the facts relating to P G Wodehouse's wartime experiences over the years that the Society believes that a fully researched paper putting the events in their proper context is an essential tool for all those wishing to refer to this period for their various purposes. Accordingly this Information Sheet has been produced, with a brief 'executive summary' guide to where the different aspects of the matter can be found.

Brief summary and guide to main paper

- 1 P G Wodehouse was earning a substantial income from both UK and US sources in the 1920s and 1930s, but as one of the first trans-Atlantic commuters found himself paying full tax to both governments on a substantial part of his income. (Paragraphs 2 & 3)
- 2 His advisers suggested that he establish his home in France, so he would pay tax to either the UK or the US government on each part of his income, but not both. (Paragraph 3)
- 3 As part of a substantial British presence in Le Touquet when war broke out, the Wodehouses were promised early warning of the need to evacuate if the German invasion approached. This was never received. (Paragraph 4)
- 4 The Wodehouses did not wish to leave unnecessarily because their dogs would have to be quarantined on arrival in England. (Paragraph 5)
- 5 When they did seek to leave, two car breakdowns prevented their departure from Le Touquet. (Paragraphs 6 & 7)
- 6 Wodehouse was interned as an alien male under 60 and taken via a series of camps to Tost in Upper Silesia. (Paragraphs 8 & 9)
- 7 Readers of the American *Saturday Evening Post* sought information on the whereabouts and treatment of one of their favourite authors. The USA was still neutral, and a petition for his release, signed by many prominent in American artistic associations, was handed in to the German Embassy in Washington. (Paragraph 10)
- 8 The German Foreign Office had the idea of gaining favour with the USA, whom they wanted to stay neutral, by releasing Wodehouse a few months early and arranging for him to broadcast to his fans in neutral America. There was no 'deal' for him to broadcast in return for freedom. The success of the plan, of which Wodehouse remained completely ignorant, depended on him NOT being viewed as a sympathiser. The broadcasts have been accepted by all who read them as wholly innocuous in nature and make highly humorous reading. (Paragraphs 11 to 16)
- 9 The Propaganda Ministry hijacked the plan by causing the broadcasts to be sent to the UK, about a month after their transmission to the USA. Because the broadcasts had already been recorded, Plum was unable to prevent this. (Paragraph 17)
- 10 The broadcasts which, as can be seen from their texts (click on [this link](#)) were innocuous in content, were received hysterically in the UK. The tabloid journalist Cassandra obtained the approval of the Minister of Information, Duff Cooper, to launch a vitriolic tirade against Wodehouse on the BBC, despite the Governor's protestations. (Paragraphs 18 and 19)

- 11 The Wodehouses returned to Paris in 1943 and lived on their own funds and borrowed money, which they later reported in detail to Major Cussen of MI5. (Paragraphs 21 to 25)
- 12 Wodehouse was interrogated by Major Cussen, whose thorough report to the Government makes clear that he was wholly convinced of Wodehouse's innocence in matters of treachery. (Paragraphs 27 and 28)
- 13 Following the acquisition by the Government of a number of files from the German Embassy in Paris, a very determined attempt was made in 1946/47 to find evidence of payments which might have been made to him for services rendered to the German government, presumably to support any prosecution that might take place in the future. Despite thorough research, no such evidence was found, and all the British Government officials involved concurred in the conclusion that he had done nothing treacherous. (Paragraphs 29 to 31)
- 14 The Wodehouses remained in France until 1947, when they sailed to the USA and never returned to Europe. He was knighted in 1975, six weeks before his death at the age of 93.

Wodehouse's Actions During the War – Put In Context

- 1 How true it is that many of life's misfortunes have their origins in wholly unrelated decisions made for valid reasons. P G Wodehouse's wartime experiences, triggered by the unlikely combination of tax laws and quarantine restrictions, are a good example.
- 2 As a playwright, lyricist and author, 'Plum' had been in heavy demand on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the inter-war period, and the only way in which he could meet his contractual obligations was by becoming one of the first transatlantic commuters. But for a man with substantial annual earnings in both the United Kingdom and the United States this generated significant tax complications. Put simply, he was liable to pay income tax twice on his earnings from either the US or the UK, depending on which of the two countries he spent most time in each year.
- 3 Tax law has become less draconian since then, with international conventions to mitigate the effects of double taxation, but in the 1920s and 30s international taxation was in an immature state of development. Wodehouse's advisers put forward several suggestions to reduce his tax bill to a fair level. Eventually he adopted what seemed the most sensible, though not a terribly convenient, suggestion: to establish a home in France which would enable him to pay, only once, tax on British earnings and tax on American earnings. So in 1934 he settled in Le Touquet, from where he could easily travel to Paris to work with Guy Bolton, to Shipbourne in Kent to see his step-daughter Leonora and her husband Peter Cazalet, and to Dulwich in London, to his old College where he still liked to watch rugby and cricket matches. The length and frequency of these visits back to England were of course restricted by the requirements of the then tax law on residence.
- 4 There was already a substantial British presence in Le Touquet and the Wodehouses became good friends with their neighbours, Arthur Grant, the golf professional, and his family. As the threat of a German invasion became more serious, Ethel Wodehouse was generous in her hospitality to the British officers in the area and offered what amounted to open house. The Wodehouses had billeted with them two French military doctors and were in contact with the British Vice-Consul in Boulogne. With these various sources of information they expected to be advised to leave in good time if it became necessary.
- 5 Although some British residents left Le Touquet long before the Germans arrived, the Wodehouses stayed for as long as they felt they could for one major and one minor reason. The major reason was that they couldn't bear the thought of putting their Peke, Wonder, in quarantine for the six months that would be required on their return to Britain. The lesser reason was that, like quite a number of other residents who remained, they did not want to be thought to have panicked or to have lost confidence in the British forces by leaving before it was essential.
- 6 On May 20th, 1940, Ethel Wodehouse drove to the British Military hospital at Étaples and was reassured by the Commanding Officer about the limited progress of the German advance. Nevertheless, the following day they did leave for a port, but broke down within two miles. Returning home they joined the Grants and others in a small convoy of three vehicles which set off together. Unfortunately, again, one of the vehicles broke down and by the time repairs had been effected and the entire party reunited it was early evening, so a quick decision was made to try again the following day.
- 7 Overnight the Germans took Le Touquet.
- 8 After some weeks during which Plum had to report daily to the town square, the German Army interned all male alien nationals under 60 (releasing them as a matter of course when they reached that age), and as he was only 58¾ Plum was included in

the round-up. He was taken with many others to a series of temporary lodgings in prison camps until he arrived in an old mental asylum at Tost, in Upper Silesia.

- 9 During this period he kept a camp diary, which he adapted into a series of entertaining talks for his fellow-internees that were, according to one listener, the late distinguished historian Barrie Pitt, received with much laughter and applause. Written with typical humour and panache, and reflecting the code of honour among British prisoners that they kept a stiff upper lip, they showed how the British could maintain their spirits in adversity.
- 10 Meanwhile, Wodehouse's American public, particularly the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, in which the majority of his novels had been serialised during the inter-war period, had been seeking information about his whereabouts and his treatment. He had received many letters to which he was not permitted to reply (as well as a few food parcels), and a petition for his release, signed by many of those in prominent positions in American artistic associations, had been organised and presented to the German Embassy in Washington on his behalf in June 1940.
- 11 America was still neutral and not yet in the war, so a crucial plank in German foreign policy was to try to maintain her neutrality. The idea of releasing Wodehouse early was the brainchild of Dr Paul Schmidt, the Head of the private office of the German Foreign Secretary, Ribbentrop. Schmidt felt that releasing Wodehouse a few months early would be a relatively simple matter about which to obtain the agreement of other German ministries, and would demonstrate to the Americans that Germans were caring properly for a non-Nazi internee. Schmidt's plan hit a snag, though, when Goebbels and the Propaganda Ministry refused to agree to Wodehouse's release.
- 12 At this point the mixture was enriched by the entry of a second Paul Schmidt, the Director of the German Foreign Office's American department. He had been Hitler's interpreter and was an admirer of Wodehouse's novels. Prompted by brief messages broadcast by many British prisoners of war to reassure their families that they were still alive, Schmidt came up with the idea that Wodehouse should not only be released early, but be invited to broadcast to neutral America along the same light-hearted lines as his talks to fellow-internees. This time, Goebbels's ministry agreed.
- 13 Wodehouse knew nothing of the behind-the-scenes posturing and was both surprised and relieved when he was released, unexpectedly and without warning, some 3½ months before he was sixty, the date when he expected to be freed. He was taken to Berlin, where the German Foreign Office had arranged that he should come across Werner Plack, who happened to have been in Hollywood around the same time as Plum. The task assigned to Plack, who was now working in the German Foreign Office, was to facilitate a proposal that Wodehouse might like to contact his friends in America by making broadcasts about his experiences.
- 14 Wodehouse was, as is generally acknowledged, a compulsive writer. He had always made it his business to reply to any fan mail and felt uncomfortable that he had not been able to reply from camp to his correspondents. The possibility of making the broadcasts seemed to him to be a much-needed opportunity to thank them and tell them that he was surviving, and remaining cheerful. (Interestingly, the texts, which were substantially those of his camp diary and talk to fellow-internees, seem not to have been censored by the Germans.)
- 15 At the outset of his interview with Major Cussen of MI5 and in his first written statement, Plum reported that he had received 250 marks (about £ 20) from Plack for the broadcasts, but Plack was insistent that no such payment was made. After the first had been recorded, Plum went to spend the summer away from Berlin with the cousin of a German Hollywood friend Baron von Barnekow. (The Baron opposed the Nazi regime and shot himself a year later in deep depression about its activities.) The 250

marks referred to by Wodehouse is most likely to have been a contribution to the costs his hosts incurred in driving him back to Berlin for two more recording sessions.

- 16 It is clear that there was no 'deal' to free Wodehouse in return for a promise to broadcast. Werner Plack was to emphasise to Iain Sproat, when they met in the 1970s while Iain was researching his book *Wodehouse at War*, that the whole point of releasing Wodehouse and then persuading him to broadcast was that he was not a Nazi sympathiser and in no way a collaborator. Had he been either of those things, there would have been nothing surprising about his release, and thus no potential benefit to the Germans by way of positive reaction from America for permitting the broadcasts.
- 17 Tragically for Wodehouse, after the broadcasts had been recorded, Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry changed its mind and decided, to the fury of the German Foreign Office, that there was more mileage to be gained from portraying Wodehouse as a Nazi sympathiser, and it began a campaign to persuade neutral journalists that this was the case. It also arranged a second broadcast of the recorded talks about a month after the initial transmission to the USA, this time to the UK, without the approval of the German Foreign Office. The very fact of the broadcasts (self-evidently outside Wodehouse's control) – as opposed to their content – was to continue to fuel the adverse reaction in Britain.
- 18 The British Government's immediate reaction was one of understandable dismay, but it is to their discredit that no attempt was made to discover the underlying circumstances. The incumbent Minister of Information, Duff Cooper, was under pressure to allow British journalists a greater say in the British propaganda war, and it so happened that Duff Cooper had arranged a lunch with a group of six journalists (including William Connor, who signed his regular column in the *Daily Mirror* with the pseudonym Cassandra) to discuss possible opportunities. Contemporary accounts from three of those present indicate that after a good deal of vodka and brandy had been drunk, there seems to have been an invitation from Duff Cooper to Cassandra to make a broadcast about Wodehouse with the promise that he could say whatever he liked.
- 19 The result was that the BBC broadcast Cassandra's highly scurrilous and libellous tirade. It had initially refused to do so, but Duff Cooper used wartime regulations to insist that the broadcast went ahead. Even then the BBC demanded a written instruction from him, including an indemnity against costs and damages in any libel suit after the war. Connor made no pretence of having heard any of Wodehouse's broadcasts, or of producing facts to support his assertions, but launched into his target with words of vitriol. It says a great deal for Wodehouse's benign and gentle personality that when he met Connor after the war in New York, he was willing to have an amicable lunch and maintain a friendly correspondence.
- 20 After the broadcasts, Plack was detailed by the German Foreign Office to act as Plum's 'minder', a role that was *de facto* extended to cover Ethel when she was allowed to join her husband in Berlin. He did this willingly, feeling, as did the second Paul Schmidt, considerable responsibility for having inadvertently brought about the now widespread but wholly erroneous belief that Wodehouse was a traitor. Schmidt gave Plack three instructions: that he was to see the Wodehouses regularly (making sure they got into no trouble, and offering help and advice when it could be done without compromising them); that he should encourage Wodehouse to resume writing so he could earn a living without any possible need to receive money from the German government; and to ensure that he never met any of the real British traitors.
- 21 After requiring the Wodehouses to remain in Germany until September 1943, the German authorities eventually allowed them to return to Paris, and as soon as the Allies arrived, Plum reported to the British forces. After a preliminary interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, then a British Intelligence Corps Major, his actions were thoroughly investigated by Major Cussen of MI5. Under the government's rules

relating to the provision of information, all the extensive papers and records of interviews and researches which then took place are now available to the public.

- 22 Wodehouse never received money from the German government. The evidence of Wodehouse's statement to Major Cussen, and Werner Plack's subsequent discussions with Iain Sproat, make it clear that he paid for himself and Ethel both while they were in Germany and later in France. In each country they paid their own hotel bill. Their sources of funds were varied: royalty payments from neutral countries for local book sales; borrowings from acquaintances which were to be repaid after the war; the sale of Ethel's jewellery; selling to a German company the film rights to his novel *Heavy Weather* on condition first that no propagandist use was made of this and secondly that the film was not released until after the war; and selling a short story to a Paris newspaper. (The film of the adaptation was made in 1944 with the title *Der Meisterdetektiv*, and was offered for sale on DVD in 2003.)
- 23 Despite the impression given to the contrary by the national press, the various sums of money listed in the German Embassy files obtained by MI5 in 1946, and first disclosed to the UK public in September 1999, are capable of ready and simple explanations which accord with previously available information. The sum of 580,000 French francs 'given' to Wodehouse by the Embassy in Paris in October 1943 is the same 30,000 marks which Wodehouse told Cussen was the maximum he had been permitted to take from Germany under currency regulations. This sum represented about half the amount the Wodehouses had raised whilst in Berlin but not yet spent, the other half being left with Plack in Germany for safe-keeping.
- 24 Ethel Wodehouse was to complain about the slowness with which Plack returned the remainder of the money, but even he still needed to be careful about the currency regulations. Iain Sproat believes from his discussions with Plack that the 100,000 francs (£ 250) described in the Embassy papers as 'travelling expenses' would have been a small instalment towards that repayment, the remainder of which he was able to arrange through the Swiss Consulate in Paris in September 1944, as explained in Major Cussen's report.
- 25 The final references to financial matters in the MI5 papers were to payments of 180,000, 60,000 and 60,000 francs (in total, £ 750) made in June, July and August 1944. MI5 at first suspected that these may have been payments for work done on behalf of the Nazis, but they later rejected this conclusion. In fact the payments correlate, as reasonably as could be expected in the circumstances, to the sum of 320,000 francs which Wodehouse listed in his statement to Cussen as having been received as royalties from his Spanish publisher, Jose Janes, which of course had to be paid through the German authorities.
- 26 The Embassy files also mentioned other curious matters, such as an enquiry as to whether the Wodehouses might be entitled to receive soap and cigarette rations through the Embassy, and a request to German military authorities to ensure that Low Wood, the Wodehouses' home in Le Touquet, was maintained in good order. Iain Sproat is sure, from his talks with Plack, that these were part of Plack's response to the instruction to look after the Wodehouses without compromising them.
- 27 Major Cussen was so convinced of Wodehouse's innocence that in his report he wholly exonerated him from being liable to any charge, and the British Government's legal advisers concluded in 1944 that there were no grounds for prosecution. Wodehouse had been, in the quite exceptional circumstances, naive and foolish, but no more than that.
- 28 But this is not how Ministers explained it in Parliament. A caveat was added that no guarantee could be given that there might not be some prosecution if he were to return to England in the event that any new evidence were to appear.

29 As indicated above, around the end of 1946 a number of files taken from the German Embassy in Paris were studied by MI5 and extensive efforts were made to produce relevant evidence. The emphasis placed on the matter by different UK government departments can be illustrated by the following extracts from inter-departmental correspondence in 1946 and 1947:

1 In a manuscript comment on one memo, dated 30 December, 1946, Mr G C Allchin, Head of the Consular Department at the Foreign Office, wrote:

“I think it unlikely that the payments to PGW were in reward for pro-German activities. They are probably advances from his own funds in France or derived from Switzerland or elsewhere. These funds were of course controlled by the German authorities.”

2 On 4 June, 1947, several months after the payments in question were known to all the authorities concerned, another member of the Foreign Office staff had commented, after receiving information from a member of his staff that had been requested by MI5:

“I feel bound to observe that it seems to me most regrettable that we should still be pursuing this matter more than two years after the end of the war in Europe. I do not think that anyone would seriously deny that ‘L’affaire Wodehouse’ was very much a storm in a teacup. It is perfectly plain to any unbiased observer that Mr Wodehouse made the celebrated broadcasts in all innocence and without any evil intent. He is reported to be of an entirely apolitical cast of mind; much of the furore of course was the result of literary jealousies.

Assuming that the present payments prove to have been innocuous I would suggest that in any reply we may make to Mr Wakefield we should take occasion to deprecate MI5’s apparent enthusiasm for the chase and to indicate that in our view this matter is trivial in itself and at the distance of time, cast off into oblivion . . . ”

3 Whilst trying to assist Mr Wakefield with his investigations, the Foreign Office also conducted a search for mentions of Wodehouse in German documents, but Mr A C Johnston confirmed on 21 July, 1947 that “there is no sign of him in the lists of British broadcasters for the enemy”.

4 Mr G H Wakefield of MI5 spent several months trying to obtain specific information about four payments (those of 100,000, 180,000, 60,000 and 60,000 francs mentioned above) made between May and August 1944, presumably to add to the weight of evidence should any prosecution take place. After failing to do so, he wrote on 25 July, 1947 to Mr Allchin:

“I feel fairly confident . . . that if he were doing anything at all to earn these payments – of which we have no evidence whatsoever – it was not of a very treasonable character.”

On receiving this letter a member of the Foreign Office staff had added “I hope that this file is now finally closed”, and Mr Allchin, in his reply to Wakefield, wrote:

“It looks as if the file might now be closed, never, let us hope, to be re-opened.”

30 It has been suggested that the MI5 papers from 1946 and 1947 show that, if he had returned to the UK, Wodehouse *would have been* prosecuted, *as a result of the disclosure of the payments made through the German Embassy in Paris*. This is **NOT** the case for two reasons. First, although the Director of Public Prosecutions had

previously advised that there were no grounds on which to proceed in any action, a letter of 18 December, 1946 to Mr Wakefield from Mr B A Hill, reporting a conversation with the Director, makes it clear that the Director's view had changed somewhat, having been influenced not by the evidence of the payments but by a new interpretation of the law relating to broadcasts on enemy radio. The Judge in the William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) case had ruled that the *motive* that prompted a broadcast should be regarded as immaterial. In the light of this new interpretation, the Director now believed that if Wodehouse were now brought to trial a *jury* could be invited to decide his innocence or guilt in relation to the 1941 broadcasts (which had been light-hearted in content and made to a neutral America).

- 31 But secondly, the letter records that in any event NO final decision whether or not to prosecute was taken as Wodehouse was not in the country.
- 32 So Plum Wodehouse received no formal clearance at that time to return to the UK, and in 1947 he and Ethel sailed from France to America where they lived with their dogs and other animals on Long Island. It was not until the early 1960s that a clearance to return was given, on request, by the then Attorney General. However by 1955 Plum, at the age of 74, had taken American citizenship and the lingering possibility of a return visit to the UK had finally disappeared. Happily the Knighthood that he was awarded shortly before his death in 1975 made some amends to him for having been physically cut off from the one country in the world that he loved above all others.