Elisabeth Furse

One-time Communist whose bohemian bistro in London attracted politicians, diplomats and aristocrats

Picture: CAROLINE FORBES

Elisabeth Furse: was recruited by British Military Intelligence, but betrayed by an informer

ELISABETH FURSE, who died yesterday aged 92, was a former Communist, wartime resistance worker and London bistro proprietress, whose Slavic warmth and ardent personality attracted a wide circle of devoted friends; these included diplomats, MPs (among them one former Foreign Secretary), journalists, students and miscellaneous aristocrats who would happily crowd around the table in her cluttered basement flat in Belgravia to eat dubious food off jumble sale china.

Reviewing her autobiography in 1993, her old friend Lord Owen told of "a life almost inconceivable for most of us to imagine in its fortitude, frailty and overall zest". Its dominant and compelling theme was the conjunction of grandeur and poverty. She was princess and peasant at the same time.

She was born Louise Ruth Wolpert on August 30 1910 at Königsberg (later called Kaliningrad) in what is now the Baltic Sea enclave of the Russian Federation. Her father was a Russian-speaking Latvian Jew and a wealthy textile merchant; her mother, also Jewish, a German-speaking Lithuanian from a family of rich corn merchants. Louise was nicknamed "Lisl" by an aunt, from which she derived Elisabeth, the name she adopted for herself.

Her childhood was privileged but loveless. Her mother told her: "You are not beautiful, nor are you pretty, but you have charm, good teeth and good legs. You may make it." This she did, but on her own terms. Her vivacious character found its means of expression as a teenager when she joined the Communist Party.

"I told the comrades I was the daughter of a grocer, and I left my family and my home. I gave up the Chippendale, the Gobelins, the Meissen, the Bohemian glass, the Persian carpets and my own room. I went out, literally penniless, into the world. My father very wisely cut me off. I was, and have remained ever since, a self-made poor. This is quite different from having been born into poverty or having been forced into it. I have no envy of the rich. I chose my condition with my eyes open, and by hard work and determination I have managed to remain poor when circumstances were against it."

In her early twenties, she was tasked with collecting money in France and England to help political refugees in Germany, mainly Party members, escape the Nazis. Soliciting support for the cause, she met many of the leading artists and writers of the time: Picasso, Braque, Giacometti, Thomas Mann, André Gide and H.G. Wells. In such figures she instinctively looked for the real individual beneath the public persona.

Her first marriage, in 1934, was a marriage of convenience, intended to give her a new nationality and with it legal residence outside Germany, when her activities with the Communists put her at risk of arrest and execution by the Gestapo. She married Bertie Coker, a journalist and fellow Communist.

She left the movement in 1934, long before Stalin's excesses disillusioned his supporters in the West, and moved to London, where she was offered a job as interpreter and companion to a Russian actress. That engagement led to a formal job as a cinematic continuity girl. In later years she was very proud of her ACTT (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians) membership card, with its early membership number, 35. The card entitled her to free admission to cinemas in London, and she would always make her distinguished status known to amused box office staff when claiming her free tickets.

Her second marriage was to Peter Haden-Guest, son of a Labour MP. He was 22, an aspiring ballet dancer, and still an undergraduate at Oxford. Their alliance was sealed in a cinema, where they had the following dialogue:

"Where shall we go for our honeymoon?" he said.

"Italy."

"No, Spain. How many children shall we have? I think four."

"No, six."

After a pause, he said: "I'm serious. I intend to marry you."

His mother didn't approve, and stopped his allowance, but they eventually married anyway. "He brought me back to elegance and fun and life," she wrote: the perfect antidote to the ascetic rule of 1930s Communism. Their son, Anthony Haden-Guest, now a successful journalist based in New York, was born in 1937.

Elisabeth was in France, and separated from Peter Haden-Guest, when war broke out. She spent part of 1940 in the Brittany château of the Forbes family, where she recklessly fell in love with a German officer, one of a group who had commandeered the house. Pretending to be American, she was allowed to remain in the house with her infant son and his nanny, until an indiscreet remark brought catastrophe. At dinner with the Nazi officers, who up until then had shown the courtliest manners to her, she remarked that Churchill, a friend of the family that owned the house, had often dined at the table at which they were sitting. Their response was to burn down the house and send Elisabeth and her child to an internment camp.

The following year, while being transferred to another camp, she escaped from her German escorts. Disguised as a widow, she fled from occupied France with Anthony, giving him fragments of sleeping pills when they travelled by train to prevent him from speaking English.

She made her way to Marseilles, where she joined MI 9, a branch of British Military Intelligence engaged in helping British soldiers and others opposed to the Germans to escape Occupied France. When her group was betrayed by an informer, she was held in squalid conditions in a women's prison in a castle overlooking the harbour at Marseilles. During negotiations over her release, occasioned by her status as daughter-in-law of an MP, she would smuggle out messages from other prisoners in condoms hidden in her vagina.

She returned to London, where she found that her high profile and indiscretions, such as the one made before German officers at the Forbes house, made her unfit for further intelligence work. She spent the rest of the war in the comparative safety of rural England, on the Devon estate of the family of her third husband, Pat Furse. They married in 1945, and Elisabeth continued her career in the film industry.

In 1952 Elisabeth and Pat took the lease of a small, "beautifully shabby" workman's cottage at Bourne Street, near Sloane Square. Pat was an artist, and they sold pictures and antiques from the house. Elisabeth worked as a continuity girl. When, by the end of 1953, commitments to her three small children had grown to make location work impractical, she and Pat started a small bistro in the house.

Based on the French idea of the bistro as a sociable yet intimate annexe to the home, Elisabeth's Bistro attracted a diverse and dynamic crowd. Neither the décor nor the food were of high quality. She despised hygiene. Clement Freud, then a Liberal MP, was so upset by Elisabeth's cooking that he took her aside and trained her to cook a steak and an omelette. Her attitude to food was formed in years of poverty and wartime imprisonment.

After the bistro closed in 1970, she held court at her house in Chapel Street, Belgravia, at a long refectory table given to her by the industrialist Jeremy Fry. This table was usually covered with papers and a manual typewriter on which she would pound out blunt letters telling people exactly what she thought of them. These communications invariably arrived in a reused envelope, addressed in her Germanic scrawl.

Her house in Chapel Street, and its heterogeneous community of lodgers (mostly students), was immortalised in fictional form in 1991 by the novelist Sam North, whose superb novel *Chapel Street* contains a character – a Mrs Gorse – who was clearly based on Elisabeth.

In the early 1980s, her friendship with David (now Lord) Owen, allied to an apostate Communist's distrust of the far Left, which was then in the ascendant in the Labour Party, inspired an early enthusiasm for the short-lived Social Democratic Party, of which Owen was leader. *Harper's & Queen* described her as "the mother of the SDP". Lord [Robert] Skidelsky and the chess player Nigel Short, then both SDP supporters, also became her friends.

In 1993 her autobiography, *Dream Weaver*, was published, with a title suggested by her son, Johnny, who felt it expressed her talent for self-invention. The book gathers together the cycle of anecdotes that formed her colourful life story, all her adventures and love affairs. It was ghost-written by the *Harper's & Queen* writer Ann Barr, and Elisabeth affected indifference towards it. It is, perhaps, the only book ever written whose author claimed to be completely unaware of its contents.

Her zeal for politics remained as strong as ever in her later years. In 1991 she went to Maastricht to follow the treaty negotiations at first hand, somehow obtaining a press pass for the purpose. With her crutch and her wheeled shopping basket, she stood out as the oldest member of the press corps, and was interviewed during quiet moments by younger colleagues, with whom she shared her forthright views on human affairs. Her last political enthusiasm was for Jimmy Goldsmith's movement for a referendum on British membership of the EU. That he, too, was a "Bistro boy" certainly helped focus her interest.

She is survived by two sons, Anthony Haden-Guest and John Furse, and three daughters, Katya Chelli, Anna Furse and Sara Furse.

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