

## **Pamela's Diary story of Guernsey Occupation 1939 -1946**

On 3rd September 1939 when Britain declared war on Germany, my Auntie Pam wrote this account of her war experience in her diary.

"I can remember it well. I was at our next door neighbours using her piano to do my practice. She had the wireless on anticipating this announcement and they listened to the Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain, say that "The Germans have been given a deadline of 11 a.m. this morning to remove their troops from Poland and as this has not been done, we are at war with Germany." Everyone was in tears especially my parents Reta and Bert Luckie, who'd already gone through the Boar War in Africa and then again through the great war of 1914-18, so this was an unbelievable blow."

However, not a lot happened between that day and June 1940, except that many local men joined the services to fight for 'King and Country'. My brother Bertie Jnr joined his father's old regiment, The Middlesex and my sister Muriel's husband Freddie, joined the Royal Engineers."

Her story continues:

In the middle of June on a glorious sunny day, Pam was on the beach at Vazon when Dolly the maid came running down and told her she must come home at once, something terrible was happening. They ran back up the hill as fast as they could to the house only to find everything in uproar. Reta was in tears and Bert pretty choked too. They had to break the news that Pamela was to be evacuated with her school the very next morning. The Germans had, by then reached the coast at Cherbourg and St Malo. Parents were being advised to send all children of school age to England. They were to be allowed to take one small suitcase each plus a packed lunch and a drink. As an 11 year old, Pam was secretly excited thinking of it more as an adventure than anything else. She'd never left the island before and couldn't understand why everyone was so upset.

The families had to gather with their children at 04.00hrs at their respective schools. Each parish school was set different times because they had to sail on different boats. It was a dreadful moment for the parents, the anguish of not knowing where the children were being sent or even if the ship would safely cross the Channel without being torpedoed. (Pam notes: "It was only when I became a parent myself that I fully realised the extent of their sorrow. In fact as I write this my heart aches and I find myself crying.") They had to leave their parents at Amherst School and taken down in buses to the White Rock harbour. It was to be another 3 to 4 hours before any boats arrived to take the children away. Pam's boat was the 'Antwerp', a filthy tramp steamer.

As daybreak came although it was a sunny day, it was windy and they had quite a bumpy crossing. Many of the children were seasick and Pam went round sharing her bottle of water which they gladly accepted. She became known as 'Florence Nightingale'. Fortunately she managed to stay upright, but it seemed like hours before they arrived at Weymouth.

On arrival in England there was an army of voluntary helpers waiting, including the Red Cross, Salvation Army and WVS. They had to go through a whole lot of rigmarole including having their hair inspected for lice and chest examinations for lungs in case of T.B.

They were questioned about all sorts of things. (Pam notes: They probably thought we were Germans in the making!) Finally they were loaded onto a train, quite an event for 'Guerns' who had never even seen a train in their lives! Their destination was Glasgow, Scotland – a 16 hour journey. The Scots were extremely kind and generous. They were put into Camphill Church Hall where camp

beds were lined up all around the hall. There was another big room with trestle tables which was to be the dining room.

Pam remembers feeling very homesick whilst still at the Church hall and wrote a postcard to Reta and Bert saying "Please, please, please come and get me!" It was the last communication they received in the post before the Germans arrived, so you can imagine how devastated they must have felt.

Eventually the day came when they had to 'line up' by their beds while the locals came around to choose who they would be willing to take into their homes. Pam was chosen by a local Doctor and his wife. They took her to see their house which to Pam's mind was super. Their own children were slightly older but very friendly. However, before the 'take over' was finalised two unknown Sots cousins turned up to claim Pamela, who was not amused as she really wanted to go with the Doctor. But it was considered that relations were closer so she was despatched to a clean but gloomy Glaswegian tenement building. In those days Scots tenement buildings were very bleak. Climbing many flights of stone steps to each floor and the rooms were dark. In the kitchen/living room was an alcove curtained off to contain a bed. But one thing that lifted the spirits was the delicious Scotch pancakes and cakes as weekend treats.

Later that same year Pam's elder sister Muriel, left Guernsey with her 2 year old baby Barry when the second batch were evacuated for mothers with children under school age. She went to stay with her mother in law in Barry, South Wales. Gladys Kirby, Muriel's cousin remembers seeing her off. She said, "It had been snowing the day before and my mother and I went to see Muriel off down at the harbour around 5.am. As the sun rose I remember all the trees glistening, it was all so beautiful, but also very, very sad to watch Muriel and all the other families leaving."

Unfortunately the Germans arrived much quicker than expected, preceded by a squadron of 'dive-bombers' who flew in and bombed the harbour. At the time, queues of lorries loaded with the season's tomato crop were waiting along the 'White Rock' hoping to get a ship to take their goods to England. As the planes started to machine gun the harbour, a lot of the drivers dived under their lorries for cover, only to be killed when their vehicles burst into flames. The next day German planes landed at the airport with the first batch of occupational troops.

By this time Bertie Jnr had been taken prisoner of war at the fall of Dunkirk (1940) in France. He was sent to various POW camps and ended up in one on the Polish Border where he was incarcerated for the remainder of the war. (May 1945) The only source of communication was a very occasional Red Cross message, a brief few words of 2 or 3 lines - and this only after months of not knowing where he was.

When the Germans first occupied the Island, they took over Pamela's parent's house, Chateau D'Albecq as it was in a prime vantage viewing spot by the coast. Reta and Bert had still kept the house in Rosaire Avenue so they moved in with Douglas, who at 16 had decided to stay with them and not leave the island with Muriel.

They had to take in German Officers and their batmen. One officer was a heavy drinker and very offensive. One night he came home 'sloshed' and used the bath as a toilet, and not just to wee in! Reta was furious and reported him to the Commandant. Bert was terrified she'd be shot, but the German Army Police came and took him away. He was severely reprimanded and was eventually sent to the Russian Front which he dreaded!

Back in Wales, it wasn't long before Muriel had managed to find out where Pamela was through the Red Cross and once she realised there was to be no further contact with their mum, dad and Douglas in Guernsey, she got on a train to Glasgow to be with her. They all squeezed into the limited space available. Then Muriel decided she'd had enough of Scotland and sent a telegram to Mr and Mrs Grimsdale in Oxford who had been regular visitors to Guernsey staying with the Luckie family. Being an influential solicitor, Mr Grimsdale secured a small semi detached house for Muriel, Pam & the children in Cornwallis Road, Oxford. Because Muriel had taken Pam away from her 'official' billet in Glasgow, she couldn't claim any allowance for her and at that time the army allowance was only 30 shillings a week for herself, Barry and Pamela. With the rent being 7/6p a week, there wasn't much left to live on.

Muriel was an excellent pianist & soon managed to get odd jobs in the evening as a pianist and by the end of the war was the resident pianist in the orchestra of one of the theatres. She also met a London conductor who got her work singing on BBC radio and on one occasion even read the story on 'Listen with mother'. Pam remembers that nearly every Guernsey person who had evacuated to the UK heard about this on 'bush radio' and also discovered later from various sources that they all tuned in and sat weeping for joy at the sound of her voice.

They had clothing coupons and could only buy outfits that were covered by the coupon allowance. Also all food was rationed. Everyone had their own ration book and you were limited to very small portions of butter, meat, fruit, sweets and chocolate, milk and sugar, jam etc. Amazingly, people were much healthier during the war.

They were very lucky really as Oxford was never bombed during the whole 5 years Britain was at war, despite the fact that it was surrounded by RAF stations. Sometimes they would hear the odd bomb drop from a German bombers who were turning back home, but fortunately these fell in fields. One night the air raid siren was sounded and for the whole evening they heard the German planes roaring overhead, (they had a very distinctive sound). They waited for the bombs to drop but nothing happened and they realised the planes were heading for somewhere else. The next morning on the wireless the news was of the bombing in Coventry which had been badly 'blitzed' and almost raised to the ground.

## **BIBERACH CAMP GERMANY**

Bert and Reta Luckie along with Reta's sister Edith, her husband and daughter Gladys were sent to Biberach from 1942 to 45. These are Gladys's memories

In 1942 there was an announcement in the Guernsey Press saying anyone who was not a natural born Guernsey person was to be sent to Germany along with their family. Gladys (Kirby) then 26 years old, didn't need to go as she was born in Guernsey, as was her mother. But as her father was English she refused to let her parents go without her to look after them.

They were only allowed to bring 1 suitcase and Frank Stroobant who owned a big local grocery store in Guernsey gave each one of them a small box of food. The cattle boat went to St Malo and then they were herded onto trains at the station. While they were waiting to leave, there was an air raid and they couldn't do anything about it but just sit there and pray, petrified! Luckily they weren't hit. They were given nothing to eat or drink for their journey and on arriving at Biberach they were then made to walk to the camp which was quite a way from the station and included a very steep hill.

Before they could go to their barracks they were made to line up to be counted. The barracks were made up of 2, 4 and 8 people to a room with just 1 toilet to a barrack. She was in a room for 8 with her mother Edith and next door was her Auntie Reta Luckie. The men were separated from the women.

To get their food they had to line up carrying a plate. A German soldier would march them across to the kitchen. If they made too much noise he would shout at them and raise his gun. They were then marched back to their barracks by which time their food was cold. Unused to German food of sauerkraut and potatoes, Gladys was not enamoured. She also remembers being given camembert cheese which they had to keep outside on the window ledge because it stank so much. Whilst these German soldiers were a bit fierce, they were eventually sent off to fight in the war and were replaced by an older set of soldiers who were reasonably friendly. Gladys remembers befriending a soldier, whose name was Otto, who after the war, regularly visited them in Guernsey.

Once settled in the camp a few of the men were given gardening jobs with the local people and they brought back some of the vegetables which they grew. This was very welcome as there was a food shortage for the first couple of years. Sometimes if they were walking near to the fences that enclosed them, the local German people would come and give them little bits of food through the fence, which even they could hardly spare. But later when the Red Cross parcels started to get through the food not only improved but some of the camp workers took food to the German families who were by then, getting less food.

In the winter when the lorries came with the coal for heating, they would go down with their Red Cross boxes and the German soldiers would give them a few lumps of coal for their barracks stoves. These were not cooking stoves but one could just heat some water on them.

Whenever she was allowed Gladys would go on 'wood walks' where they could pick up any fallen branches to take back to their barracks for heating. These walks always had a guard front and back of the groups.

During the day Gladys always found things to do. She joined a group who put on shows and was in a musical show called 'Wild Violets'. On another occasion, Gladys was given a solo song to sing and after the introduction she opened her mouth and nothing came out! She remembers this so clearly, the feeling of horror standing in front of all these people! But she started again and she was fine, in fact she was given a great ovation afterwards.

There were quite a few babies born in Biberach, she says no matter how they tried to keep the men from the women, they found a way!

Christmas was always a sad time for them as they wondered how much longer they would be interned. She also remembers hearing bombing going on in the town and they worried that they might be hit as they felt so vulnerable. But the camp leader persuaded the guards to put a big sheet on the roof top so the pilots would know there were English prisoners there. Gladys's most frightening experience was whilst watching a football match with her father, when a training aircraft was in trouble above and dived at them crashing about 25 metres away from the camp. She was sure they were all going to die!

When they were liberated by the Free French army who entered the camp, Gladys remembers the men were very bedraggled. In fact they looked like tramps, but they didn't care as long as they were all being released! They had to have thumb prints for identification and for some reason Gladys was somewhere in the compound at the time and got separated from her parents. This was very

distressing because she got to Memmingen airport and didn't know where they were. Luckily, they were re-united back in the UK. Sadly, Gladys's father never recovered from this terrible ordeal and within a few years of returning to Guernsey, he committed suicide.

### **LIBERATION DAY 9TH MAY 1945**

Eventually, after nearly 6 years the war ended. V.E Day (Victory in Europe) was an amazing day. Church bells rang nearly all day. Car horns blaring and the 'booze' was flowing! Everyone was out on the streets all day and into the early hours, singing, dancing, cheering and waving flags – it was incredible! They'd never experienced anything like it. The next day, the headlines were all about, "Our dear Channel Islands are liberated today" so more crying, laughing, hugging and kissing which just went on and on!

They had no idea where Bertie Jnr was until some weeks later. A telegram arrived to say that he was in a hospital just outside Oxford. Muriel, Reta and Pam rushed to see him – another emotional time. He was there for some time but had to go back to his regiment until he was able to be demobbed.

Bertie's story: Unknown to the family who last knew him to be in a P.O.W (prisoner of war) camp somewhere near Poland, was at that time being force marched by the Germans towards Germany as the Russians starting running them from the east. It eventually became known as 'The Death March'. Apparently his mates were dropping like flies from exhaustion and starvation at the waysides and having to be left to die in most cases. He never really got over the horrors of this and although he was, with luck and determination, able to manage to hold on until rescued by the British and American armies, it took him months before he could even speak about it without breaking down. (No post traumatic assistance in those days!)

Sometime in August 1945 they finally got permission to return to Guernsey. They all returned until early 1946 when Muriel and the children joined Freddie on his 5 year tour of Germany, so another tearful farewell.