

World War II

My Early Days; Evacuation and Schooling

WW2 broke out in Sept. 1939; I was just nearly 5 years old, but was at early-year school at the other end of Whitechapel's Ashfield Street, where we lived.

And the government, fearing bombing was to be a prequel to invasion, (I'm not sure if it ordered, or suggested) that all schools in London and the Home Counties should be "evacuated" from those areas. So, we were lined up, with a change of underwear and wearing heavier outdoor clothes, marched off to – buses, coaches? – then to Liverpool Street Underground Station. My first time on the "Tube". We were ushered off at Paddington, thence via the tunnels to the main Rail Station. All that I remember is that huge glass ceiling, and the long line, four abreast, of not just our school. And me crying, because my dear friend Frances was not with us. Some years later, my brother David sent a newspaper photo of a huge mass of youngsters in that station on that sort of occasion; he was convinced that I was shown there. (I do NOT know where it may now be, which is why I cannot include it – not because I don't want you see what a scrap I was at nearly 5!) ell; I do not recall the journey; now I know just how far and how long it is to reach our destination ---

Penzance, in furthest Cornwall. Where we were boarded onto a coach, driven along the road that hugged the coast-line, allowing us to marvel at the sight of THE Sea. We were schoolchildren from London!

We, eventually it seemed to me, arrived at winding streets that we later knew as Marazion; and wound our way to be deposited at a school. There we were assembled in a large hall, and waited, and waited, and waited!

I wandered off, got to a large almost empty room. Almost, for in the centre of it was a huge table – covered with what seemed green grass, on which were depicted model sheep. I was busy admiring this, when in came three older lads – who grabbed my cap, pulled down my trousers, and demanded, "Where do Jews keep their horns and tails?" Luckily, an adult woman then came in, shooed them out, and came over and gave me a cuddle, before taking me back into the hall. And there, I still waited while the girls were chosen by incoming adults, usually women, very occasionally also males, until there were very few of us left. Then I was – chosen? - by a woman carrying a small babe. It turned out that she lived down the hill from the school on the main road overlooking the cliff-edge. Like so many of that generation, she was alone because her man

was in the services, a seaman.

Her back garden stretched way up the hill; vegetables growing such as I had never seen in the shops, and, being Cornwall, lovely still flowering Bulbs. Unfortunately, she couldn't cope with a crying babe and a bed-wetting youngster! So, I was taken from her to be rehoused. Which turned out to be almost at the far furthest end of the village; one of three cottage's which were at the land end of the causeway from nearby St. Michael's Mount. That is a granite mound, with a long-standing castle owned by the St. Aubyns family (who recently donated it to the National Trust -- on condition that they could continue to live there!)

The two elderly ladies who now/ then lived there in those cottages had been employed on their estate, and on retirement had been gifted the cottage, which had been part of the estate.

It was on coming away from that school at the end of a day that one of those defining moments happened. I had reached the kerb, ready to cross to the back lane to go "home", when an older boy stopped me. He said, "S'that right, yer mum's been killed in a bomb?" (Yes! I CAN remember his words, and the London accent) I must have protested, because I raced across the road, I don't recall looking for traffic, up the alley-way to that long back lane that took me out almost opposite "The Aunts", and again without hesitation rushed across the main road to rush through the front door, to blurt out the news I had just been given, and demanding that "It wasn't true".

To be enveloped with hugs, and kisses --- which since I had NEVER had previously, I immediately knew that it was true. Apparently, Dad had written to them some weeks earlier, but they thought it better not to tell me! I rushed out the back door, across the garden, over the small stone wall onto the beach. Where I ran for a while, until I reached a stream running down to the sea;

I knew even then the problem of gaining new shoes/clothing (war-time rationing), so turned back. Again, more hugs (no kisses, this time!), because apparently, I had gone through a mined area.

A little while later I developed Cornwall's own illness, rheumatic fever; and was taken into Penzance Hospital. Surprisingly to me, my father came some three times to see me --- at a time when private train travel was discouraged. It seems that for one so young there was the risk of heart failure. I have no idea how long I was in there -- and have no wish to inquire of their records!

The next time-phrase I cannot explain, nor why/how it happened/occurred! And it is important, because it is of my returning to London. And of course, not to my original, actual mother. Dad had remarried – and I now had a new baby brother. And not to my original Whitechapel; this time to Saint John's Wood, NW8. Which was within walking distance to "Mum's" mother off the Adelaide Road, between Swiss Cottage and Camden Town. And that was just below Primrose Hill, where there was an anti-aircraft gun site; which gave rise to the expression "Booming Bertha". Years later, I met with a younger chap who had lived near Streatham Common where there had been a similar gun-site. But he thought it was a local prostitute earning her living! Also years later, when one could go up said hill, one could see right across north and central London – so that was why the anti-aircraft gun site was chosen there.

I have, obviously, bypassed my Dad's wartime involvement; - and also my mother's; - firstly though, when I was only 2y.o., and therefore didn't *then* know anything about it, Dad was stopped from joining the East End protestors barring Sir Oswald Moseley's British Fascist Movement marching through the, predominately Jewish populated, East End, in what is known as Th Battle of Cable Street. That was because of me! Locals advised him *not* to risk himself, since he had a duty to be around for his baby.

As an aside; when our daughter started college, she teamed up with a grandson of Moseley's; -- his father and he are lovely people.

So; during the early days of war, Dad was working in Wembley at a munitions factory during the day, and doing fire at night. During which, he was *commanded* to join The Home Guard – he refused, on the grounds that *his* various veins prevented him doing that "marching and stamping" that had been Moseley's reason for being excused doing that same. And one night he heard about the Tragedy of Bethnal Green; the ARP – Air Raid Precaution unit – advised Londoners to take to the Underground (Tube) stations during an air raid; on this occasion, when the All-Clear siren went off, the departing crowd were coming down a long flight of steps when someone fell—causing those in front to fall into those in front of them. The ensuing melee caused a lot of people to be crushed to death. My mother wasn't among them – but was still killed just a few months later. She was about to have a third child, and The London Hospital sent pregnant mothers to the "safe" haven of Epping,

Spriggs Oak – a house donated to them by a retired colonel as a safe haven for pregnant Londoners. Where, just as she was almost ready to give birth, a German plane dropped a bomb which killed three women. It is thought that it was looking for a nearby airport, which it couldn't find – but not wanting to return home with its bomb-load, had dropped them when it saw car lights going up a hill. So, an explanation of an earlier recorded episode!2no,

As I have indicated, I came home to a new baby brother; one day, doing my usual duty of rocking him to sleep in his pram outside of “our” house under the blossoming may-tree, I was approached by an American serviceman who stopped and said to me, in an accent that I cannot reproduce here! “Hey, kid, wanna banana?”, which of course, was such a rarity– which I grabbed, without even saying “Thank You”, and jumped the sixteen stairs down to our basement home. And by the time mum had managed to get out of me what had happened, and raced up to thank him – there he was –GONE.

But this wasn't my only encounter with uniformed soldiers; - again I was outside, rocking my brother when TWO uniformed servicemen came up the street. As they got nearer, I recognised the blue as being English Air Force – worn by my cousin Toby. The other was in a different outfit of a light, brown-like colour – and not a face that I recognised. Toby greeted me, and introduced the other as, “My American cousin, Bernard.” - which confounded ten-year old me, as his brother was Bernard! Mum made them welcome - I remember with a cup of ENGLISH tea! -- but during the talking they told us “That they couldn't tell us what/why they were here!” – But a few days later we were aroused to a continuous buzzing of overhead aircraft.

Rushing upstairs, we could see the sky filled with aircraft; bombers with two smaller fighter-types on either side of them. And a day later, the news –radio AND newspapers, were full of what they called “The D-day landings”.

As an aside, not on our TV—since in those days we were not one of the very few that DID have such an expensive “luxury”.

Again, a cross-reference; I have mentioned my cousin Bernard – he was in the Commando Regiment, but for some reason that 11y.o.me didn't know, wasn't in his regiment's dire attempt to enable the Allies forces to capture Arnhem, which resulted in the almost the extinction of that regiment's current force. As a result of which, he transferred to the

Military Police. After the landings in Normandy, in spite of Arnhem, the Allies were still advancing into Germany; and the said Police were ordered to attack the known German Concentration camp of Bergen Belsen. After the war, with a lot of persuasion, he told of going through a wood, which was in complete silence apart from members of the crow species. And filled with the stench of blood. And approaching the wire fenced compound, the preceding ground was covered with rotting bodies --- not buried, merely dumped. And, of their commanders questioning locals, to be told, No- they knew nothing of what was going on in that camp!

And while I have no intention of continue to write about the Allies continuing their march against those “Nasties”, since that is all available in published official records, there was the Germans last offensive, directed against British towns --- The Buzz-bombs! Pilot-less, fighting, things that were actually bombs! One could hear the noise of their engines --- until that stopped. When we knew that the machine was now dropping to earth, with its explosives. One counted to ten, and if then one didn't hear an explosion, you knew that the bomb was not near you. And, yes, I did have such an experience.

We, that is, “Mum”, planned to take me and their new son to her families' relatives in the NE, to the Geordie town of Blythe. So we went to Dad's sister in Stoke Newington whilst they went back to St. John's Wood to collect clothing etc, for the stay. So there I was, rocking my baby brother in the front room, with the front windows shuttered by cloth curtains – when a buzz bomb could be heard, and almost immediately stopped sounding. I left the pram handles and crouched over the raised rain-hood. There was a tremendous BANG, and the windows crashed through the curtains --- and smashed into the back wall, just where I had been standing rocking. While my aunt and her daughters rushed in, somehow, we heard the news that there had also been a similar blast – in St. John's Wood! How such news travelled, I still do not understand -- -I can only guess that it was London taxi-cab drivers! But equally, my parents also heard of the explosion near their children!

But we all *did* survive; and Mum, young David and I trained off to Northumberland. Family didn't have room for us, so we had to have rented placement. I was started at a local junior School, the final year; and do you know – those boys all said it was ME that had the accent! It took me giving a few black eyes and getting a few goals in the

playground to be accepted as a real “person” – but we weren’t there for very long. Because, that flat we were in was infested with fleas! So Mum took us back to London --- she considered Hitler’s buzz-bombs less trouble than Geordie fleas! But, once there- those attacks ceased, and peace was declared not long afterwards.

We were lucky as a family that no-one was injured nor killed, either abroad nor in the UK --- only MY mother.