

Eveline Taylor's memory of wartime 1939-1945

I truly did not understand the meaning of the horrendous news. I had just enjoyed my eighth birthday. Schools always closed around that time and I had always escaped that peculiar practice of being carried by body, stretched to receive bumps and thrown upwards, matching the number of years. I learned instead, that, with my sister, we would probably be going away without Mum and Dad. It was the evacuation of children by thousands from London which I remember. Somehow in my mind, I thought it was a holiday. The issue of a gas mask and a label pinned on my blazer did seem strange. We had joined our schools at London Bridge station. My sister was now 12 years of age, and in the secondary school, but she had been linked with me. Dad was not at the station, and I did not understand why Mum was crying. Though she was tearful, I was excited and waved happily goodbye. It was later on arrival at Burgess Hill. I think that the penny dropped.

We had to wait for someone to call our name. A local dignitary was the billeting officer. After a short journey, we were standing at the front door of a terraced house with Mr De Caux, to be billeted with Mr and Mrs Thorpe. They were having their Sunday lunch with several others around the table. I have no idea if they had been expecting us at that time, but they welcomed us in so eagerly that I felt reassured. It was to be six years later, except for a couple of short reunions, when I returned home at the end of the war. Those years with the Thorpes were among the happiest years of my life. As a child, one does not dwell upon the long-term, it is that capacity to take each day as it comes, to live for the day. My Catholic upbringing tells me that, but age has a habit of losing the knowledge.

Life became a time of waiting for Mum and Dad to come down from London to be with us for the occasional weekend. Dad had been called up for military service, he spent three weeks near Southampton, getting acquainted, only to find himself being discharged for duty with his old firm. The powers that be had managed to secure his return to be the Fire and Security officer of that Thames-side company. He had to join the home guard on ack-ack guns in Southwark Park as well, and this lead eventually to a four-hour night's sleep every night if he was lucky. Apart from the bombing all through the Blitz, home and war work had its toll on him. At the end of the war he spent two months in hospital at Orpington.

Now what about my mother? She was due for war work too. Luckily, she had the right qualifications to be an operative within the local hospital. There the seamstress was an essential part of the massive linen unit. She would be employed most of the time, altering or repairing, bedding, uniforms, and anything else to be mended on her machine. Mum had a very different machine from her tabletop Singer. It was more industrial. She still kept the housework and necessary meals going, as well as clearing up any bomb blast mess that might have fallen. My parents were lucky that there did not appear to have been any structural

damage at that time, but the dust and a mess still rained down after each night's bombing. To my reckoning, they were heroes. When Dad spent all that time in hospital after the war, she was working, looking after Sheila and I and visiting Dad regularly.

When my sister was nearly 16 years old, she left Burgess Hill to take up an apprenticeship in Selfridge's, Oxford Street. This meant I was left without family. At the time there were the Rossi twins billeted at 'Auntie' Thorpe's with me. Their parents were Italian, perhaps father was interned. Their mother ran a little sweet shop in Deptford quite alone, with very little English to help. We three little girls had a great time together. Our greatest pleasure was to be taken to the local cinema to see the latest films suitable for our age group. Uncle Thorpe always accompanied us. He enjoyed it as much as we did. The stars of the film, then were Betty Grable, Don Ameche, Alice Faye and the very handsome John Payne. Also Clark Gable and Tyrone Power, equally good looking. One of the most memorable things to happen then was my schoolteacher, Miss Bottomley, married the cinema owner. It was also the time of the massive military gathering for D-day. Many of these men, English and Canadian were the ones we waved to as they drove past us on the London Road in Burgess Hill towards the South coast. How many I wonder came back.

Thinking of the war and what it did to us, as adults and children, myself at an early age in life, I have had to think in the now fashionable context of mental health. We didn't have a name for it then. At the age of 90 however, I now realise it did have an enormous influence on the rest of my life. We were separated as families for many weeks, sometimes sharing with strangers or making close friendship with new people. I think for most of us, there must have been changes in our make-up. I know that once, when my mother remarked, "You no need to worry about Eveline, she'll always get along," I now know she may have been right. The practice was constant, but it has not always been easy. The lesson learned for me is the wartime separation let me into a self-survival attitude. The lack of demonstrative love was of a lesser degree, than that is shown today. Though with the rise of the "me society, perhaps that too shows a sad lack of recognition. We really do need love, it is necessary for true happiness.

When the war ended, there was great happiness and probably sadness. I know the Thorpes missed their Charges very much. A house that was always filled with young people could seem empty with just these two dear ones alone. We always visited them when we could for many years after. Also the allowances from the Government for each evacuee was stopped. True, there was less expenditure, but it must have had an effect upon them.

The world celebrated the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, but had to wait until August of that year for the end in the Far East. It was unbelievable that the Japanese could think of continuing fighting in the circumstances, knowing that it was now a matter of time. Time was not allowed for them, and the Atom bomb began their finality, followed by years and

years of its consequences. The men and women who had suffered so much torture and decess in the war were now free. The hell they had endured was now to be seen and it was very difficult for people to feel sorry for the Japanese. During those last months the evacuees were returning to their homes at last. Myself among them.

Eveline Taylor, ex U3A member no.83 Emsworth.