

Chapter 8

Early war years, school evacuations and call-up

**August 1939 –
February 1941**



Peter was ordered to report at school each morning with iron rations (corned beef sandwiches), as were all of the rest of the staff and the pupils. Monday – Tuesday – Wednesday, each day they filled in time until four o'clock – then they ate their sandwiches and came home. On Thursday, though, when he got home, Peter said, “Pack your own haversack and make another packet of sandwiches. The Old Man says you are to come too tomorrow”.

So we arrived at the school at about 8.30 am. Not only were all the pupils there, but many of them were leading younger siblings. At 9 am we started to march through the narrow streets towards Stratford station between pavements lined with parents and grandparents, weeping and waving. The scene was made all the more poignant as one of the older boys with only one leg was walking on crutches at the back.

We reached the station at last and lined up at the back of the platform. Trains came in and trains went out carrying other children but not ours. Eventually an empty train arrived and we were packed in. It started – stopped – waited – started again – and by 4 pm we reached Brentwood and were ordered out; collected ourselves and marched to Brentwood School where we gathered in the central quadrangle.

There were two WVS ladies there with a little table and a school notebook. Warily they surveyed us.

“Let me see,” said one, “Mrs Gibson said she didn’t mind taking in a little girl with blue eyes and blonde curls. Can you see one?”

By 6.30 pm they had selected and billeted 23 children. Then they went home to tea taking their book with them. By this time the mainly conservative staff were very angry and some began to sing *The Red Flag* while my father went for the police. One policeman stopped all the traffic. The others took each took two children, piled into the waiting cars and went from door to door all over Brentwood ringing and knocking. When the door was opened they said “Police – these two children are yours for tonight,” and packed the children inside. By eleven o'clock all, including the staff, were under cover.

Ours wasn't the worst, thanks to the Old Man. Five hundred High School girls had also arrived unexpectedly. At midnight several were found by their distraught headmistress in the local brothel, each sharing a bed with one of the prostitutes. Peter and I were allocated to a delightful couple who made us feel very welcome, and kept an enormous bowl of their own apples on the breakfast table for us. We stayed there for three weeks and our first cooked meal was liver and bacon. Now I was not fussy about my food and could eat with relish practically everything *except* liver and malt toffee. How could I tell them? They had taken so much trouble! So I forced it down, convinced I would be sick at any moment.

They were delighted to find something we all enjoyed and liver was served three times in the next three weeks! Having eaten it once without a fuss I couldn't say I didn't like it – and eventually I found that I did – all that fuss throughout my childhood for nothing!

Some of the more alert of our pupils had posted their postcards home to announce their safe arrival before the last post went. Brentwood was only a shilling bus ride from Stratford, so why not visit the little dears to make sure. After all, it was Saturday. Parents started to arrive at lunchtime ... but ... we had no idea where any of their offspring were! Although the war had not yet started the Government expected bombing might well start before a formal declaration of war, so we were forbidden to call the children together.

My Dad was in his element. He took over the best room in the best pub in the High Street as his office. Peter and I were recruited as his aides and worked with the billeting officers. The Declaration of War on Sunday passed un-noticed – we were too busy tracking down our children and moving any who had been put somewhere unsuitable. Several of the more affluent residents of Brentwood resented the evacuees from the East End of London. Two of our girls were nagged until they got fed up and went home. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, two great girls of fifteen, to be still at school instead of going into service to help your poor mothers.” It made no difference that theirs was a Grammar school at which they were either paying fees or had scholarships. That first Sunday more than one well-heeled family sat down to Sunday Roast in the dining room while their evacuees ate their very elderly corned beef sandwiches in the kitchen. However, most of the residents, mainly the less well off, did their best to make their visitors welcome.

Part of this time Stratford Grammar School was able to use Brentwood School for lessons. After three weeks Peter and I were found a house to share with the Economics teacher and his wife, Mr and Mrs Smith. The house was amazing and had been built bit by bit over the centuries. At the front it was a very old, low-ceilinged cottage. The door opened onto one of the two front rooms, out of which a low door revealed a winding staircase to a bedroom, ours. Another door led into another front room, theirs, from which a second staircase led nowhere. A fourth door from our sitting room led into a high ceilinged passage, Victorian, giving access to a square dining room on the right and kitchen, bathroom and lavatory on the left. Behind that again was a large single storey school room, now partitioned to store coal and wood and to serve as a box room. A wide imposing flight of stairs led up from the hall to a second bedroom, theirs. There was a pleasant garden.

As our sitting room had four ill-fitting doors it was full of draughts. The first thing we bought was a folding screen. The room was heated by a tiny basket coal fire set into the wall about 15 inches up. If we folded the screen right round our two chairs and kept the fire going well we managed to keep reasonably warm that cold winter. We all four ate together, sharing the cooking and each Sunday Clifford Smith and I went over the weekly accounts. One weekend I remember we spent two hours trying to find an error which made them a penny out. Peter offered to put a penny in, but Clifford was horrified. The error must be tracked down. We kept on finding little notes when we got in reminding Peter that the second peg in the passage had been allocated to him but he had hung his hat on the first *again*, Clifford's. The two families were not ideally suited.

Mind you, Clifford Smith was an admirable man. He had obtained all his qualifications, Matriculation, Higher Schools Certificate, Degree and Doctorate all by correspondence courses. All his mature life he had gone to bed at nine – risen at five – worked for two hours before seven when he began to prepare breakfast for his wife who got up at eight and retired to bed at eleven. They had no children.

One evening as we sat huddled round our little basket fire protected by our screen we saw a black vase which stood on the floor full of paper spills for lighting cigarettes start to dance about!! “Peter,” I cried, “there must be a mouse and it must be roasting alive.” He knocked the pot over and we waited for a mouse to run out. Nothing! Peter tipped out the spills and peered inside. Empty! “It must have been a Poltergeist,” he said. So he spent some time writing out a spell against the supernatural in Elizabethan handwriting and pinned it onto the wall above the fire. We never found what caused it, and it never happened again.

Hardly had we moved into our shared house than I was asked to coach a couple of children; a girl aged twelve and her brother aged seven. They had been suffering from tubercular glands in the neck so had not been able to go to school. They could both read, write and add up. Next term they would be ready to attend a school but meanwhile needed to catch up. So they came to me every morning. They were both intelligent and we read widely, learning most of our Geography and History from story books, although we had text books as well. They enjoyed writing stories and could spell reasonably well – but they knew no maths.

However, they soon learnt their tables and “what makes ten”. By Christmas they were happily solving quadratic equations – not that they were specially gifted, but they had my undivided attention so understood what we were doing.

Half the time Peter was teaching Stratford children in Brentwood School. For the rest, in particular for the Sixth formers preparing

to get to university, he had to improvise – sometimes in cafés, sometimes in our house – sometimes if it was warm enough, outside.

We were still members of the Communist party and so got to know several interesting people. One, a black doctor, was married to a blond wife. They had two children, the boy exactly like his father and the girl like her mother. When Peter suddenly developed arthritis in one knee, that doctor ordered him crutches and forbade his putting that foot to the ground for six months.

The winter got colder and colder. Someone left the tap dripping in our bathroom and in the morning we found the bath solid with five inches of ice so no-one could have a bath until the spring when we were at last able to lift out the bath-shaped iceberg and take it into the garden.

It was still there in the spring, and Peter was still on crutches, when the Old Man asked us to go to Cornwall to set up a second evacuation. He had heard on the grapevine that since a lot of children had drifted back to London during the Phoney War because bombing didn't materialise, the Government had ordered a new evacuation; this time we were to go to Helston, twelve miles from Cadgwith, from which we had been snatched on our honeymoon. He reckoned we would have three weeks and he gave us a list of pupils likely to be going this time. So we took what we could carry, spent a night or two in Blackheath, and caught the *Cornish Riviera* again.

It arrived very late – in those days one could go by train all the way to Helston, and we were tired, so we turned into the first hotel we came to in the main street, booked in, and slept soundly.

Before breakfast we went out to buy a paper and were surprised to be greeted by passers-by: “Good morning Mr and Mrs Hewett. I hope you slept well.”

“How on earth did they know?” we asked one another.

Our list enabled us to match up our children with the offered homes, so when they arrived, three weeks later – how did my father know? – we were able, on the whole, to match evacuees to homes.

When the day came the Old Man sent the Senior Master to take charge, he himself staying with those children who preferred to risk the bombs yet to come.

“God help you if you let those children get onto any train that is not going to Helston. You will have me to deal with – so stand firm,” he said. So for four hours the Senior Master and the school stood firm against all pressure from police and station staff. In the end the right train came in and they embarked. Many, many

London schools were sent to Cornwall that day, but we were the only one that got to the right place.

Peter and I had arranged to share a granite house with the French teacher, Mr Betts, his wife and three-year-old son. Some of the teaching took place in Helston Grammar School and some in church halls. If I needed to know where Peter was, all I had to do was to step outside the front door and ask the first passer-by. They always knew.

Down in Cornwall rationing meant very little. Our milk came from Jersey cows and was literally half cream. There was a solid fuel Cornish stove in our shared kitchen. We skimmed off the cream and left it on the back of the stove to turn into Cornish clotted cream with its delicious buttery-yellow crust.

Every morning a fisherman called with a large basket of fish. Each night he would let his nets down over the cliffs at Porthleven, the nearest fishing village, and each morning he would fill his basket with whatever he had caught and call round to his customers. Many of the fish I had never seen before, but he would advise on cooking methods. He also fished for crabs with crab pots and these he boiled. If you put a live crab into cold water and slowly bring it to the boil the crab stays whole. If you are soft hearted and kill them quickly by dropping them into boiling water they “shoot” their large claws where most of the meat is. He must have been soft hearted because for a penny or two I could buy a delicious large claw full of white crab meat.

There was a dairy just up the road where one could buy eggs off the ration, lard with which to make lardy cake, unrationed rabbits, chickens, Cornish pasties, and saffron to make saffron cakes. I learnt to cook them all in the side oven of that stove. Although we shared the kitchen there were no problems. Mr Betts was a vegetarian and ate mainly lentils and Mrs Betts cooked very little. Young David Betts had already learnt to make early morning tea for his parents, and somehow never scalded himself. Mr Betts had been brought up to go into the Air Force and when he announced that he was going to university to read French instead his father disowned him, so he had financed his way through college on his Bridge earnings. He only played for money and he always won. Every now and again, as we went up to bed at about ten o'clock he would come back from the pub with three local men and they would settle down for a whole night's Bridge. As we came down to our breakfasts we would see them leaving, sadder but I am afraid not much wiser. He had only recently taught himself Russian by haunting the docks in London to meet Russian seamen, and offered to teach us, but I only learnt a word or two.

Peter's leg was still bothering him quite a bit. Eventually he graduated from crutches to a stick – cobbled streets on a steep

slope were not 100% suitable for crutches. When his call-up papers arrived he went for an interview but was deferred. The summer weather was glorious that year – we had a white camelia and a medlar tree in the garden.

When autumn came, and then winter, the weather was still warm but misty. We woke up each morning to find our hair wringing wet on our pillows and shoes left in a cupboard for as much as a week grew grey mould. At the beginning of December I developed a bad tooth-ache and the dentist diagnosed an impacted wisdom tooth, decided I needed gas for the extraction but had no way of calling in a doctor to administer it that day. I was to come back next morning. During the night my face swelled up like a balloon and I couldn't open my mouth. For days I went each morning for infra-red treatment to bring down the swelling but it had no effect. All over Christmas, for which I cooked a delicious chicken, I was unable to eat anything larger than a grain of rice. Eventually the dentist decided that he must somehow force my mouth open or I would have to go into hospital to have the tooth out through my cheek. As I breathed in the gas I felt him kneel on my lap to get a purchase, and when I came to I had chipped front teeth and a very sore face, but the wisdom tooth had gone.

Peter's arthritis was improving so they called him up again, but the muscles in his leg had wasted so he needed physiotherapy. Eventually in late February 1941 he joined the Royal Ordnance Corps as a private and was posted to Earl Shilton in Leicestershire. Solemnly he handed me his stick as he boarded the train.

I followed him a fortnight later, as soon as I had sorted out our affairs in Cornwall.