

Chapter 11

# **Post-war holiday, Russian Embassy**

**Summer 1945 –  
Christmas 1945**



While Peter was teaching the young people as Stratford Grammar School, I had been getting to know the mothers of other young people of Gale's age. Whenever I was at 44 Lee Park I always tried to take her to the clinic. Soon there was a group of us, all with girls as it happened, and all the girls first children and within three weeks of one another in age. We would meet in the afternoons in the little park across the road at the bottom of Lee Park. This boasted a pond and nearby a little café where we could get a cup of tea even in wartime. We began to meet, some of us, most afternoons, park our prams and daughters by the railings to look at the ducks and socialise ourselves over tea. Ellie and her daughter Margaret became particular friends, as did Pat and her daughter who actually lived in our road, and Nesbitt Filtness with her extremely good, clean daughter.

Ellie and Margaret lived in an upstairs flat in a working-class road of two-storey houses with no gardens. The children had to play in the road. We decided to campaign for a nursery school so we canvassed that road with a petition, discovering sixty-five children under five among the residents. Of course we didn't really expect to get anything done in wartime but hoped the idea would recur after the war.

Nesbitt too lived in an upstairs flat but solved the problem by taking her baby out all day to friends or the park and doing her housework in the evening.

Now that the war was as good as over we began to plan a summer holiday. My mother had a friend, Peggy Angus, who lived in a cottage in Glynde about eight miles inland from Brighton across the Downs. We wrote to ask her to find out if the local farmer would allow us to camp on his land – and got permission. Next we chose a few friends, Ellie with Margaret – Ellie's husband was still in the Forces – and a John Manley and partner who had a baby just at the sieved vegetables stage. We renovated the tents, not used since we left them in Cornwall in 1939, and hired a little van from a greengrocer. This was open at the back with a hanging tarpaulin curtain, and was probably illegal for passengers but we didn't think of that.

When term finished we packed ourselves in with all our camping equipment and luggage – a tight squeeze, and John drove us down.

We camped in the lee of a small copse planted on a slope, and shared the site with a herd of young bullocks. There was no fence or hedge between us and Brighton. As there was plenty of wood about we cooked on a camp fire. Gale and Margaret, not quite two, soon began to run about with no clothes on and Gale, quite fearless, would pick up a stick and chase the herd of bullocks down a little earth path through the trees behind us. They did

always avoid the guy ropes. We had packed her cot – but she could climb out easily although we laced the top backwards and forwards with rope. Most evenings in the dark we would become aware of a little figure in a white nighty setting off across the Downs towards Brighton and someone had to run to retrieve her.

On our last day we didn't light the fire so the ashes were cold. We were all busy, taking down the tents and packing up when we became aware that Gale and Margaret were sitting on the camp fire site rubbing the ashes into each other's hair! The two men had to go many times the hundreds of yards to fetch a bucket of water before we could get the girls clean.

Milk, like everything else, was rationed then so we cleaned out the water bucket and the farmer filled it with milk for us to take home. This we fastened onto the "ceiling" of the van, which seemed a good idea at the time – but we arrived home with half a bucket of milk, the rest liberally distributed over ourselves and our belongings.

While we were away the Americans had dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thus slaughtering Japanese women and children in payment for the brutality of the Japanese soldiers, and then war in the East was over too. Peace had come.

We worked hard for the Labour Party during the election of July 8th, even though we were not enamoured with Herbert Morrison, our candidate in Lewisham East who had run the London County Council before the war and was a friend of our parents. We had to wait a fortnight for the results to allow for the counting of the Forces votes. Arthur and Peggy joined us in Blackheath in a little local pub on the evening of the final result. We had not expected a landslide, but we got one. Britain had its first Labour Government with a proper majority. The air was full of hope.

My mother was approached by the new government to go as an ambassador to the women of America under the Ambassador Lord Halifax, and managed to slip out of the country on Friday October 10th before the press got hold of the news, so they came and interviewed me, and tried to put words into my mouth. Of course, they got most of it wrong, as they generally do, under the headline "Glamour Grandmother Flies to America", and her photograph was on the front cover of *Picture Post*, a famous and popular magazine of the time.

While she was living in Cambridge she had acquired a boyfriend, Professor Norris, one of the atom scientists who was in the process of inventing lasers. Now he left his wife and twin daughters for Spikey, a silly thing to do as she was out of the country. So he used to come and cry on our shoulders. He had been invited along with the five hundred other most important people in Britain to a celebration of the Russian Revolution at the

Russian Embassy in London on November 7th and asked me to go with him in my mother's place. I did have a little black frock, but as they didn't make women's shoes my size during the war, had to wear men's shoes. Luckily the other guests were so crowded together no-one could see my feet.

Long tables were covered with snacks of all kinds caviar, quail's eggs, pickled cucumbers... and everything alcoholic you can imagine. As fast as a guest emptied his or her glass one of the slightly sinister looking members of the Embassy staff would fill it up.

Of course, I was with a group of scientists, the Huxleys and sundry eminent professors, but scientists don't talk about science at parties and they were not scintillating. Just behind me, back to back, stood the very young and beautiful Michael Redgrave with his glamorous theatrical friends and I was sorely tempted to turn round, but it would have been rude, so I didn't. Never, before or since, have I seen a crowd of people, the most important people in Britain and me, drink so much so fast.

On our way back to the station Professor Mott was sick in the taxi and had to be taken home, so I was left sitting in the entrance to the Café Royal, a venue I had never aspired to visit.

Spikey sent us marvellous monthly parcels. Rationing was even stricter just after the war than during the fighting and the tins of ham, the rich fruit cakes, the packets of cheese and interesting biscuits were very welcome. One of the cheeses was sweet and we were never sure that we liked it, so had to keep nibbling to find out until it was all gone. She also sent us copies of *The New Yorker* which we read from cover to cover.

My middle brother, John, had now been demobbed. He had quarrelled with his sergeant about the right way to make doughnuts so had been posted from the 6th Air Arm and sent to India thus missing the slaughter and instead spending a very pleasant time shooting tigers with minor princes. As he had spent the previous three years training at the school for chefs and waiters before working at the Dorchester Hotel in London I expect he was right about the doughnuts. Anyway, it probably saved his life.

Now he joined B.O.A.C. as a steward and flew backwards and forwards to USA and Canada, each time stocking up the plane's refrigerator with butter and meat to bring home. No wonder his mince pies tasted better than mine that Christmas.