

Some wartime memories – Tony Mould (1941 to 47).

Identity cards were given out as soon as war was declared, but rationing did not start until 1940. Bread, butter, meat, sugar, cheese, eggs and so on were then rationed. Dried eggs from America were supplied for the ration, unless you registered to keep chickens, in which case a small ration of chicken meal was given, but no egg allowance. We could only buy 'The National Loaf'. It was made with less refined flour and looked grey in colour, but was later said to be more nutritional than white bread. Clothing and furniture were also rationed, but there were no sweets or imported fruit, such as bananas and oranges, and, of course, there was no petrol available. A total blackout was imposed, which was difficult to achieve, because fabric was rationed. Many windows, for example those on tube trains, were criss-crossed with strips of sticky paper. This was intended to prevent flying glass in case of nearby explosion.

Many nights were spent in the garden, in the half buried Anderson air raid shelter. It was made of arched corrugated steel segments and with vertical end panels, all covered with earth. Probably there was no real attempt at making the floor waterproof, so the interior must have been damp to sleep in, as well as cramped and cold.

I watched German aircraft caught in searchlights, and heard the bombs and shrapnel raining down. During the day I travelled three separate bus journeys each way back to Wood Green. The first bus was number 210, a single decker, running between Golders Green and Finsbury Park. I got on near the junction of Hampstead Lane and Stormont Road and got off at the Archway, where I caught a number 41 to Turnpike Lane. The last bus was a number 521 or 621 trolleybus to Jolly Butchers' Hill, near the school. On the way to school, on the three buses, I passed about forty public houses.

I had gained entry to the Grammar school. The Headmaster, Dr. Emrys E. Jones, was an imposing but kindly figure, always in black gown and mortarboard, who made a lasting impression on me. He had been a 'Pupil Teacher' in Merthyr Tydfil and had gained his doctorate in Heidelberg. He taught us some hymns in German, even in the war. Recently, I heard that he had retired to Merthyr Tydfil and, I presume, died there.

Our chemistry master, Mr. Ellison, had been the first man to retaliate with poison gas on the Germans in the First World War. He opened the tap. Naturally, being a chemistry master, he was known as 'Stinks'. The German used the chlorine gas process that was invented by Fritz Haber. Previously he had invented a method of making ammonia, a step in the manufacture of nitrates, whose import was blocked by the allies. Nitrates are a vital component in making explosives, and so Haber prolonged the war by perhaps three years. Haber's discovery also led to artificial fertilizers, and this led to a worldwide increase in crop production. I wonder if old 'Stinks' knew about all of this.

The school had no access to its playing field, because an army searchlight unit occupied it, so no games were played. I still have no interest in sport. Many school

hours were spent sitting in the windowless but spacious lower corridors. Because different classes were there, it was not possible to have normal lessons. I remember reading some of 'War and Peace'. It seemed an apt title, but heavy going. Near the end of the war air raid warning and explosion seemed to come together. I remember sitting under a desk and continuing to eating rice pudding! Memory does not tell me, but I assume that bus journeys continued during warnings.

As the London docks were closed, my Father, who had worked there, was ordered to chauffeur a construction company director to prospect for new airfields all over the country. Later he had to drive a bread delivery van. While a chauffeur he drove through the blitz in London. It must have been a terrifying experience; buses have fallen into bomb craters and there were fires and destruction everywhere.

One night, while we were living in Sheldon Avenue, a land mine dropped not far away, on the Council Depot near the bottom of North Hill, Highgate. The depot contained a coal dump, the contents of which were blown up into the air and came down as coke and ashes over the surrounding district.

Quite often when there was a raid, and German aircraft were overheard, shrapnel from our anti-aircraft guns would shower down. It was very sharp, jagged, steel, and could have resulted in serious injury. During the war period there were also some memorably pleasant things going on. On quite a number of occasions I went to hear the still famous solo pianist Myra Hess play in the National Gallery. The emotions woven into the classical music of the masters, especially the German and Austrian ones, were particularly evocative for those engaged in the war. Another memory is that of the first classical concert that I attended. It was in the Cambridge Theatre. Louis Kentner was the soloist, playing on a Bösendorfer piano. He played Beethoven's fifth piano concerto, 'The Emperor'. Also in the programme was Beethoven's fifth symphony. Now that I think about it, both pieces of music were from the composer's revolutionary period, so apt at that early and dangerous period of the war.

At about the same time I remember being taken to a Greek restaurant just off the northern part of Shaftsbury Avenue. I was given vine leaves stuffed with meat, followed by halva, a very sweet concoction made from almonds and honey.

Another historic event that I witnessed was the inauguration of the 'Free French' movement by General Du Gaulle. It was in a theatre in the charring Cross road in London. First a French film was shown of Louis 14th eating tomatoes for the first time. When the French patriotic fervour had been roused, the General himself strode onto the stage and addressed the audience. I do not now remember the details, but the Free French forces were well and truly launched that Sunday afternoon.

Probably at around 1945 I started violin lessons with Maria Lidka. She was from a German Jewish family, but I did not enquire about her past. She was a young woman who lived at the East Finchley end of The Bishops Avenue, and played with The London String Trio. Her house was interesting, because there were three concert grand pianos in the living room. I can still picture a small and earnest Jewish

gentleman toiling at one of the pianos in his braces. A well-known viola player, Cecil Aronowitz, was also there occasionally. He sometimes played with the Amadeus Quartet. Their leader, Norbert Brining, was a pupil of the late Max Rostal, as was Maria Lidka.

Towards the end of the war I fell into conversation with a Canadian physicist in a coffee bar in the Charing Cross Road, opposite the National Portrait Gallery in London. He told me that he was working on an atomic bomb. That meant little to me at that time, but on reflection it was a clear breach of security. It was not until later that the first atomic bomb burst so momentarily upon the world.

Near the end of the war, too, the pilotless low flying V1 flying bombs came over, with their unmistakable harsh-sounding pulsating propulsion engine. I watched and made a drawing of the first V1 that I saw, and it was pronounced accurate by the local Royal Observer Corps. It was alarming to hear a V1's engine stop, because the machine would then quickly dive to the ground and explode. The popular name of 'doodlebug' did not reflect this fear. Eight thousand of these aerial bombs landed on London, causing many casualties and much damage.

I recall two other incidents. One afternoon I was on my bicycle near the Spaniards Inn, which forms an entrance to Hampstead Heath, when a V1 flew over. The engine cut out and seconds later it hit the ground, exploding in the Highgate School playing field next to Bishopswood Road, but caused little damage. Later on, the second V2 to fall on London (the first was on Chiswick) landed on the Highgate Magistrates' Court, next to the Police station. It was 6:00 am on a weekday. Naturally we heard the explosion, as it was not far away.

V2 rockets were profoundly different; they hit the ground and exploded before the sound of their transit arrived, because they were super-sonic. The sound was just the passage of the rocket through the air, as their engines had cut out soon after take-off. Often their vapour trails could be seen, high in the sky. They therefore gave rise to even more anxiety than the Flying Bombs, because they arrived and exploded without any prior warning sound.

At this time I returned to pick fruit in Kent. I still have a distaste for plums! While up the ladders we watched the new jet fighters nudge and tip over the flying bombs. Spent cannon shell cases flew about, too. Much of the time I watched the Battle of Britain dog fights and the later doodlebug chasing while up a ladder, picking those plums. In the summer holidays I went to stay in Chartham and to go fruit picking on the farm. This happened during the war and up to the time I was conscripted. It resumed after I was demobbed, because it was a way of earning money. Although I did not realise it at that time, I was living through a farming revolution. Tractors were coming into use, and the horse, that essential ingredient of farming life, was going out. This also meant that the village was changing, because up until the war it had been self-sufficient, with its own shop and trades that supported a horse economy. Certainly after the war, the all-important blacksmith was becoming the motor mechanic. People then started to own cars.

On VE Night, to celebrate the end of the war in Europe, a dozen members of the Russian Embassy walked side by side, arm-in-arm, up our road, singing. The Embassy was not far away in Highgate West Hill, alongside the Ponds on Hampstead Heath. Our local council built a makeshift bandstand for the celebrations in Friary Park, made of sandbags filled with concrete. It has long since gone.

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