EVACUATION IN ABERDARE: A Personal Story

The Summer of 1944 was a bad one for Londoners. They were used to the bombing, and sleeping in the Andersen shelters was a way of life made a little more bearable by the warmer months. Rationing was dealt with in the resilient way that Londoners were born with and a healthy black market meant that most people had enough to eat plus the occasional luxury brought in by boats docking along the Thames. The proximity of Kent meant that fruit and vegetables were usually available and of good quality. Chickens and rabbits were reared in the narrow back yards and the resulting dawn choruses of 'cock-a-doodle-doos' had probably not been heard in London since the Middle Ages. Christmas mornings were strangely silent. No, the problem was a new one or rather a new version of an old one.

My family: mother, stepfather, myself and my two-year-old sister were living near Woolwich Common, within reach of my father's job at the Arsenal. We were directly on the flight path of the bombers sent to destroy the Arsenal, the docks, the Royal Artillery base and any other promising targets. The accuracy of the navigators was attested to by the number of craters dotting the area. However, these raids had become less frequent due to the skills of the British fighter pilots and, presumably, other factors. As an eight-year-old I saw the searchlights and the occasional dog fights illuminated by them as a kind of personal ‘son-et-lumiere' and tried to escape being taken to the shelter for as long as possible. The air-raid sirens warned us to get into shelters and the 'all clears' brought us out again but apart from this we got on with our lives as usual. I went to school, my sixth to date, and was happy that an uninterrupted year of schooling had allowed me to begin to make friends. I expected to live in London for the rest of the war but Hitler had something new up his sleeve: the V1 unmanned flying bomb or 'doodle-bug' as they came to be known.

I remember standing with a group of mothers watching one of these diabolical new inventions passing close overhead. The rhythmic

drone of the engine, the long cigar shape, the stubby wings and, above all, the fiery tail reduced all to silence. We had not yet learned that the beast was not dangerous until the fuel ran out and the bomb plummeted to earth.

New craters appeared, some over the top of old ones, a school in Sidcup received a direct hit and many children were killed, and my mother became nervous. She arranged for me to be evacuated with a school from Eltham. I knew none of the children or teachers but this would be my fourth spell away from home so I don't expect I made too much fuss. The destination was to be Aberdare in South Wales.

I was eight years and one month when I arrived in Aberdare early in September 1944 after a journey totally unremembered except for my terror through the Severn Tunnel. An older girl painted a lurid picture of the tunnel collapsing and everyone drowning and my screams probably brought retribution down on her head, I certainly hope so.

We arrived tired, dirty (steam trains are romantic but not clean to travel in) and, no doubt, hungry and thirsty and were escorted to a large hall where we sat on the floor and waited to be told what to do next.

The rest of this article is an honest attempt to recall my nine months as an evacuee in Aberdare. It will probably be of little interest to anyone but myself but I have always wanted to record what was for me an important part of my life. As a picture of Aberdare in 1944 it is sadly lacking as my memories of the town are only clear as a backdrop to my own life. Please remember that I was only eight and that my memory of places and people are probably faulty on many occasions. Some facts I have verified on a recent short visit but I found very little information in the local library, probably because I did not know where to look. To avoid using 'I remember' too often I will write as though everything was exactly as I recall (after 55 years!) but I would welcome any clarification of the hazy sections.

I was one of the last children to be found a billet. The hall was becoming darker and emptier before the lady to whom I had been assigned arrived.

When she saw me she was not happy. I learned that her name was Mrs. Jones and that she had requested a twelve/thirteen-year-old girl to help her with the housework. Only the sex was correct. Before I say any more I would like to make two points. One is that Mrs. Jones came from Gloucestershire so was not Welsh and the other is that I have the utmost sympathy with her predicament. I do not think Mrs. Jones liked children, why should she? She did not appear to have any herself and I was not even her kin. She did not make my stay with her very happy but I was a past master elusiveness. I doubt if I did much that was asked of me.

Mrs. Jones lived with Mr. Jones (a shadowy figure) at 20 Dumfries Street and to my delight the house is still there. The sharp rise as you enter the street and the levelling off afterwards are exactly right, although I seem to have a clearer picture of the terraces the rows of houses made, one below the other than you can see today and the general outlook was more industrial.

Inside the house was spotless in a way I found uncomfortable, used as I was to my more relaxed home. The front door opened into a narrow hall with the stairs on the left and a room which was never used while I was there on the right (Londoners also usually had a little-used parlour but at home ours was a dining room) and we ate, sat and washed in the kitchen at the back. As you entered the kitchen the back door was on the left. A concrete path divided the house from outbuildings: a shed, a privy and perhaps more.

Inside the back door, on the left, was a bucket of water into which Mr. Jones was required to blow his nose. His handkerchief was only used to polish off afterwards. Presumably, he also had the task of cleaning out the bucket.

The only meal that I remember was breakfast which was porridge. Luckily this was no penance as I loved it and was even used to salt with it as my stepfather was Scots.

Not long after arriving in Aberdare I started at the National School. A photograph which has been sent to me confirms my recollection of the words 'NATIONAL SCHOOLS' in capitals and the fact that it was two storeys high of which more anon. I was soon in trouble.

Girls were expected to play with other girls and were given their own playground for so doing. This was divided from the boys playground by a wall. I was used to boys and boys' games and so I scaled the wall to join them. For this crime I received the cane-the flat side of a wooden ruler which did not hurt but I soon graduated to the proper version. I am not sure that I would have kept to the rules if I had known them but there was always a new one which I had somehow missed. I was soon a regular member of the queue which formed along the upper corridor waiting my turn to be caned by the headmaster. Boys outnumbered girls greatly but I did have company at times.

The local paper, the Aberdare Leader, reported the influx of evacuees from London on September 9th 1944, and on a later date reported that we had been accompanied by far too few teachers (unlike the Birmingham evacuees earlier in the war). I would imagine that the staff at the National School suddenly found themselves teaching much larger classes of children they hardly knew. They were not prepared to stand any nonsense-quite right too !

At a later date I persuaded another girl that it would be fun to hide until everyone had gone home to see what the empty school was like. We locked ourselves in an outside lavatory and waited. Teachers in those days did not stay long and soon we had the place to ourselves. We could not get into the building but the grounds felt lonely and threatening and my companion wanted to go home. I was not much

happier, but I told her we could climb out. I was used to climbing but the walls were too high, so we had to resort to shouting for help. Her shouts soon turned to screams which brought assistance quite quickly and ladders were fetched to rescue us. I think the men who pulled us over thought the incident quite amusing, but my partner-in-crime did not and she never forgave me.

To my shame I cannot recall any of the lessons while I was at school but I was an avid reader and quite mathematical, so I suppose I got by. I cannot pretend that I was anything but a reluctant pupil though. I much preferred to play.

Many of the evacuees used to gather at a children's playground that I seem to remember was at the top of town, near the countryside although I could not take you there now. It certainly had a roundabout, a large, straight swinging plank, and a swing-boat. The last was our favourite although it would never meet with modern safety requirements. I think there were swings and a seesaw also, but I am less sure about these.

The swing-boat was suspended under an iron frame and was a pretty good replica of the kind you would find at fairgrounds which two people operated by each pulling in turn on ropes which looked like church bellropes. Our swingboat held as many children as we could squeeze in and was operated by two children taking turns in pushing down the backs of the end seats. The exciting positions were these two seats because you would rise the highest but even better was to be a pusher because when your end went up you could hang on and go with it. We fought for those positions! We played for hours in this playground but whether the local children played with us or whether we fought them, or they ignored us I do not know.

In general I have no idea what the weather was like during my stay, children are rarely as interested in weather conditions as adults but I do know that it must have rained heavily at one time because

Mrs. Jones decided to visit someone in Mountain Ash (what a lovely name for a village) and I was to go too. The road was flooded at one point, perhaps near a railway bridge, and someone had made a set of stepping stones from tin cans and bricks. The water was mirky, however, and I couldn't gauge the depth and thought I might drown. In addition, I have a dreadful sense of balance when I refused to cross. Mrs. Jones stood on one side and commanded and I sulked on the other. Eventually I had to give way but my socks were wet when I reached her and I received a good beating.

I suspect that Mrs. Jones had been lobbying the billeting officer for some time to find me a new home but one final incident brought matters to a head. Mr. and Mrs. Jones had a cat (which looking back I find quite surprising as cats are not always the cleanest of creatures) and this cat made the mistake of getting pregnant. Sometime after the kittens were born they were drowned in the bucket as I watched. They were probably three or four weeks old. Did I just happen to be there or was this a way of showing me that these were not my pets as I had hoped? I don't know but soon afterwards I was collected and taken to my new home.

My new billet was with a Mr. and Miss Jones who were not related to Mrs. Jones. Mr. Jones was the minister of a local church so I expect that he was the reverend, or some other title but as I cannot remember which I will call him this from courtesy. In my memory the church was Carmel Chapel but there is a problem with this. I know that the Rev. Jones held his services in Welsh and I believe that this chapel was for English speakers. Carmel Chapel has, I know, burnt down but when I consulted Aberdare library I found no record of a minister between 1942, (the Rev. S.I.Buse), and the Summer of 1945 (the Rev. T.L.Parry). Perhaps someone who reads this could solve the mystery for me. I certainly hope so.

The months that I stayed with these kind people were some of the happiest of mv childhood. Miss. Jones was the minister's sister and

acted as his housekeeper. I always thought that they were unused to children, but my mother told me sometime later that the Rev. Jones had been married with a daughter and that they had been killed in an air raid in the East End of London where he was working in a parish. I do not know if this was true but they certainly treated me more as an adult than a child and never 'talked down' to me which I thoroughly appreciated.

The house where I was now billeted was large and probably Victorian or Edwardian. The furnishings were in keeping and my bed was so high I had to be given a wooden step to get into it. I remember my bedroom mainly because I caught measles and so was confined to bed for a time. Miss Jones must have enlisted the help of the parishioners for my amusement as a pile of children's books appeared at the side of my bed. This pile reached level with the counterpane, and I remember reading each in turn without making any selection, and then rolling over to add it to the growing pile on the other side of the bed. Utter bliss!

Whether the prolonged spells of reading or the light reflecting from the snow outside, or the measles damaged my eyesight I do not know, but soon after I recovered it was discovered that I needed glasses. Prior to these being fitted, for some reason I was given eyedrops which reduced my vision to a point where I was not allowed in school. I do not suppose the teachers were too worried—I certainly wasn't. I wandered all over, even up to the open country where I spent many happy hours. Can you imagine a little girl being allowed this freedom today? After I was fitted with glasses I wore them for nearly thirty years before I realised that my weak left eye is probably hereditary (my son has very little vision in this eye) and that I didn't need glasses as my right eye was fine!

While the snow was still thick and I was still convalescent, I helped Miss Jones in the kitchen. As in most houses of this era the kitchen was partly below ground level with a door to an outside 'well' with

stone steps leading up to the street. This area was guarded by slim black railings each topped by a black arrowhead, (I think), I certainly remember railings. On this occasion Miss Jones was making pancakes, (was it Shrove Tuesday?), and to lighten the mixture she added a spoonful of the fresh white snow. However, I was not to say a word to the minister as he would not approve. I enjoyed having a secret to keep but later, when I watched my mother making pancakes, I insisted that Miss Jones made them from snow. I became quite tearful when she laughed at me! Obviously I had forgotten the rest of the ingredients.

Meals were taken by the three of us around the large, wooden kitchen table. Soon after my arrival my Welsh lessons began. I could not possibly attend the Rev. Jones' church services until I had a little of the language and this was made to sound such a treat that I worked hard. The lessons were all oral and included songs such as 'All Through the Night'. I couldn't (and can't) sing but I bellowed out the songs happily. Eventually it was decided that I should be rewarded for my efforts, and I attended my first service. Unfortunately, I could understand little of what was happening, but I did join in the hymns. For which church was Rev. Jones minister? For years the name Carmel Chapel remained in my memory but, as I said earlier, this chapel was for English speakers. Perhaps I attended there while I was working on my Welsh? I do not know but I would be so grateful if anyone could recognise the names of the minister and his sister and my description of the church house and clear up the mystery*. Now that I live in North Wales I would dearly love to have retained some knowledge of the language but it has nearly all gone. I can count from 1 to 10 but have not found this useful so far!

I have one more very clear memory but whether the incident took place in Aberdare or not I am uncertain. The children from the school were to have their gas masks checked. The venue was a caravan in a piece of open ground and we children waited in an orderly queue. My

reaction was of pure, unadulterated terror. I was convinced that the caravan was a gas chamber and that, should my gas mask prove faulty, I would die a terrible death. My reaction proves that I must have known something of the horrors of the camps in Germany although I have no conscious recollection of this knowledge. I was young enough to cry uninhibitedly to the puzzlement of the rest of the children and the adults who could not console me. When my turn came I had to be pushed up the steps into the van where two elderly men calmly checked the mask and I felt a dreadful sense of anticlimax and embarrassment.

I had by now been in Aberdare for about six months and I had not heard from or had a visit from my parents. Only later did I learn that within a fortnight of my evacuation our house had received a direct hit. The situation was made worse by the fact that the 'All Clear' had sounded and my mother had been in the act of climbing out of the shelter. Her injuries were such that she was not expected to live and my beautiful little sister had lost an eye through a splinter of metal, although she was otherwise untouched. Thankfully my father was safe as he had been in Scotland but his time for the next weeks and months was taken by visiting my mother, whose progress was pitifully slow, and being with my sister until she recovered and then arranging her evacuation to Bristol. He had also the problem of finding a new home for us all. Later they realised that if the family had all been in the shelter then he and I would have been killed as the shelter was sliced off at ground level and we had slept in the two bunk beds in the sides.

My first visit, probably in about March, was from my father. Presumably, he also visited my sister to ensure her wellbeing. He tried to prepare me for a visit from my mother sometime in the future. I remember him warning me that I would find her 'changed'. I doubt if the message sank in. He was probably trying to protect her as much as me for which I respect him but when he brought my mother a few

weeks later I did not recognise her. The facial scars were red and raw and hideous to my terrified self. I said nothing but silently went across to my father and leaned against his leg (I can feel its bonyness now) silently hiding my face in his coat. Poor woman.

A few weeks later still and my mother came alone to take me to Swansea for some new clothes. I was certainly in need of them as I was growing fast. I chose a soft blue Harris tweed coat with a velvet collar which I loved so much I would hardly take it off, even indoors. Unfortunately, my mother had decreed that I needed a hat and gloves to complete the ensemble and these I hated. While we were in Swansea my mother, who loved the sea, tried to take me for a walk on the beach. The anti-invasion barriers of barbed wire and steel were still in place, and I was convinced that landmines had been planted also and refused to go with her.

Probably about this time my return to London was debated. The Rev. Jones and his sister had completed their term in Aberdare and had been offered a new ministry in Snowdonia. This was now May 1945, and the war was in its last throes. Another factor was that my father had found us a temporary home well out of the way of the bombing path. I was given the choice of moving to North Wales or returning to London. I chose to go home.

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*Editor's Note: There were two Carmel chapels in Aberdare. One was English Baptist in Monk Street, and the other, Welsh Calvinistic Methodist, a mile or so distant in Trecynon.