

## **I get evacuated**

Then there was a strange change in my life. It affected school, relatives and the market. It was called, for some reason, the second world war, and I was almost nine years old when it happened. Soon after we were evacuated.

The biggest change for me was school. It was shut, on the orders of the government. Their idea of boosting morale was to forcibly split families up. They called it evacuation. The children went away the parents stayed and worked, contributing to the "war effort". Incredibly, this was presented as being "better for..the children", the myth being that it was safer outside London. We now know that quite a lot of working-class parents didn't see it that way, and refused to send their kids away. But the pressure on them was enormous, propaganda was the new government technique for controlling people - and those that did resist were made to feel bad. Plus the fact that the schools were shut. In any case, even though mum voted communist, dad had too much respect for authority. Muriel and I were packed off. I remember the train journey - it was the first time I'd seen the countryside. Every time the train went over a river, I'd say "look, mummy, water". As for cows in the fields - wow!

We went to King's Lynn, and from there to Walpole St Peter by bus. I don't remember the details, but no doubt there were billeting officers dealing with, on the one hand, kids from London, and on the other hand, local farmers, etc. in various states of reluctance. Mum was told that we'd have to be split up - this must have been agony for her. But it was OK because we were going to next door neighbours. Muriel went to the Benson family, who seemed like a happy crowd. I went to the Bailey's, who had no children and probably hated them. We did not get on very well. I think Muriel was well treated, but she was no longer in a position to "stick up for me". The next door neighbours turned out to be hal-a-mile from each other. Of course we visited each other, sometimes with disastrous results. I was left to find my own way "home" after dark once. It was my first experience of complete, black, darkness, which I have never forgotten. They say animals can smell fear - well they certainly would have smelled me by the time I got back to the Bailey's.

I wouldn't say I was treated with sympathy and understanding on that occasion; something in the order of: "go to your room and no supper for you tonight". However, I did spend some pleasant summer days (1940) on the Benson farm - I think I managed to make myself sick on about six varieties of fruit. The Benson boys were a few years older than me, and liked to show-off in their built-in gymnasium - the barn with bales of hay in it. I was used to seeing children showing-off in our concrete playground, so a somersault was nothing new. But, a somersault with no hands! I could hardly believe my eyes. School was three miles away, and we walked, which gave the young boys and girls ample opportunity to do furtive things in ditches on the way. This was certainly new for me.

It was at this time that my maternal grandmother died. We were on a country road in the middle of nowhere, mum had come to visit us and I remember being told that "booba had died". She cuddled both of us, and Muriel cried a bit - but I remember not feeling anything; it didn't seem real. Mum could only afford to visit us once a month. During one visit, in the winter, I complained about a chilblain on my toe. "Take your sock off and show me" said mum. It was

when I tried to and the sock stuck to the toe that she got really worried, and we went home soon after. But only for a few weeks, then to Kettering to stay with a nice friendly family. Friendly, that is, except for the sadistic younger son whose bed I shared. The elder daughter had a birthday, but I had no money to spend on a present. So I skulked around Woolworth and half-inched a bottle of perfume to give to her. She looked somewhat startled, but thanked me nicely. Which shows what a nice family they were, because it was 'Odor-O-No', a deodorant.

After having been away from home for two years, Muriel and I went home, just in time for doodlebugs and V2s. I raced down Greenwood road one day after a doodlebug had landed, and saw the dust and chaos of war. When the V2s came we were appalled to find that you heard them coming *after* they had arrived. Sitting quietly listening to the radio one evening, mum, Ettie, Muriel and I were shocked by a horribly loud bang, No damage to our flat but windows broken in some others. The V2 had landed in the playground of Sigdon Road school, about 300 yards away. By some freak circumstance, there was very little blast damage, and the school proved to be almost impervious to such trifles, just a cracked wall. So, no holiday for us!

We went to King's Lynn, and from there to Walspole St Peter by bus. I don't remember the journey, but no doubt there were following collectors dealing with us and at least, but from Lynn, and on the other hand, had farmers etc. at various intervals. There was talk that we had to be split up - this must have been agony for me, as I was 11, because we were going to meet dear neighbours. Muriel went to the Grogan family, who seemed like a happy crowd. I went to the Harby's, who had no children and probably hated them. We did not get on very well. I think Muriel was well treated, but she was not brought to a position to "take up the bat" and our dear neighbours would not be interested in such tales. Of course we visited each other, sometimes with disastrous results. I was left to find my own way "home" after dark, which was my first experience of sleeping. Much, however, which I have never forgotten. The next morning was still dark - well they certainly would have needed me by the time I got long home again.

I wouldn't say I was treated with sympathy and understanding on that occasion, something in the order of "go to your room and do better for your religion". However, I did spend some pleasant summer days (1946) on the Bessons farm - I think I managed to make myself sick on about six chickens of trust. The Besson boys were a few years older than me, and used to show-off in their built-in swimming - the bath with holes of ice in it. I was used to seeing children working off in the concrete playground, so a summer bath was nothing new. But, a comment with no back! I could hardly believe my eyes. School was then miles away, and we walked, which gave the young boys and girls their opportunity to do things in the order of the way. This was certainly new for me.

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## Memories of evacuation by Muriel Segal

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My memory of evacuation is very sketchy, but my first recollection is the platform at Hackney Downs station brimful with children from Sigdon Road pPrimary School and mums. I remember also carrying the required gas mask, which was put in a cardboard box with a strap attached. I was 11 at the time and the thought of leaving home made me very sad. An emotional time, obviously, all round and wondering where I was being sent to and what it was going to be like. Mum took me to the station - I had never had to say goodbye like this before. I was with my brother Sidney, who was only 9. When the train finally arrived we all got aboard - each wearing our name pinned to our coats. The longest journey I had ever made, and as well as sadness perhaps an element of a sense of adventure.

I was evacuated to Norfolk - not sure what the station was but I remember being at a reception centre, waiting to be collected by foster parents (who were paid a certain amount by the then government as incentive to have evacuees stay in their houses). Having never been in the countryside before, the journey to the farmhouse will always be quite vivid. I saw cows for the first time - quite amazing at the time. The farmhouse was situated in no more than a hamlet - called Walpole Marsh - which was 6 miles from Wisbech (I was taken there once) and 12 miles from King's Lynn. Unfortunately, my brother and I had to stay with separate families. Although we were on neighbouring farms, a good half-mile separated us and where Sidney stayed there were no children. But he used to come often to where I was staying, so we were able to be together some of the time.

The family's name was Benton or Benson and they had a grown-up daughter called Grace. They were fairly kind, but I remember being very homesick. I have a drawing book from that time which includes drawings of the rooms in the flat at home. One nice thing is that the farm I stayed on, which extended to 10 acres, was planted on quite a large area with strawberries, and it was a real thrill to pick them and to eat some fresh from the plants.

Walpole Marsh as I remember it consisted of a number of farmhouses set well apart and, at the end of the lane, a Methodist chapel and the small school I used to attend, plus a shop or two. Mum and Dad came to visit us whenever they could, perhaps every month or so, I think only for the day, if only to reassure themselves, and I so looked forward to their visits.

When I became 11 it was necessary to change schools, so my brother and I were transferred to Kettering, near Northampton, so that I could attend a Central School, as it was called then. We stayed with quite a nice family, and I particularly remember their grown-up son called Tim. We came back to London before the war ended - I recall it was at the time of the doodle-bugs, or flying bombs. Having been out of the war it was a bit of a frightening experience, but somehow you get used to it. It was great to be back home.

The Schuman family, Jack and Janie and their children Muriel and Sidney, lived in a flat in Hackney. When war was declared Muriel was eleven and Sidney was nine, both attending Sigdon Road primary school. The school was closed and all the children were evacuated from London. Muriel and Sidney went outside London for the first time, travelling with their mother on a train to Wisbech in Norfolk. On the journey they were excited by the sights of the countryside. They pointed with great frequency to the cows in the fields, in case their mother missed them. Every time the train went noisily over a river bridge, Sidney would say "Water, mummy, water!" They arrived at Wisbech where the allocations were made. Muriel was allocated to the England family, who had their own children and room for only one more. But they were next-door neighbours of the Baileys who had no children, so Sidney was allocated to them.

So the children said goodbye to their mother, who promised to visit them soon, and went their separate ways. They were shocked to discover that next door didn't mean the same as in London. The England farm was half-a-mile from the Bailey farm and visiting involved unheard-of dangers. There were no pavements and, as Sidney discovered when he stayed a bit too late, no streetlights. Muriel and Sidney adjusted to the new way of living and attended the local primary school. The nearest village was Walpole St. Andrew but the school was in Walpole St. Peter, about three miles away. They got used to the idea of walking six miles every day, which was fine until the winter, when Sidney manifested a predilection for chilblains. The Baileys were not told, since a mutual antipathy had developed between them and Sidney.

Sidney liked visiting Muriel because there was so much going on at the England's farm. There was all sorts of fruit growing and they both helped when it was time to pick the fruit. Sidney enjoyed this and needed no encouragement to eat some of the fruit. The trouble was he didn't know when to stop and made himself quite sick with too many strawberries. The England's boys were a few years older than the evacuees and seemed able to perform miracles, especially in gymnastics. Handstands were performed with great nonchalance in the barn and they both did amazing somersaults with no hands. Muriel and Sidney were impressed.

Janie visited them as promised, but travelling was expensive and she could only afford a monthly visit. On one of these visits during the cold weather Sidney, at her urging, removed a sock to show her his chilblains. This was a bit tricky because the sock stuck to the foot. Soon after this Muriel and Sidney left Norfolk and were re-allocated to a friendly household in Northampton. Muriel remembers an elder son called Tim, Sidney remembers a sadistic younger son whose bed he was sharing and an elder daughter. When it was her birthday Sidney bought her what he thought was a bottle of perfume. Her smile was rather forced - it was deodorant!

After nearly two years away from their parents, Sidney and Muriel returned home with great relief.

## Some thoughts about evacuation by Sidney Schuman

January 1997

There seems little likelihood that the 1939 phenomenon of evacuation will ever be repeated in this country. The government of the day considered many plans to deal with the civilian population in the event of war. It seems that these plans were underpinned by a fundamental mistrust of ordinary working people. For example, the cabinet in 1938 considered placing a "ring of steel" around London to prevent a mass exodus. The idea of separating children from their parents no doubt seemed perfectly normal to those who were used to sending their children to boarding school.

The needs of a wartime economy may have provided the impetus for evacuation. With so many men in the military and a desperate need for weapons and ammunition, women were needed in the factories. Evacuation may have presented a means of achieving this without the accompanying investment in child-care facilities. By 1941, when so many evacuees had returned, that investment was presumably made and for a few years the factory creche became the norm.

Looking back with the hindsight of more than fifty years, I can understand a little of what it must have been like for my mother. Like many other working-class parents she was, I think, strongly opposed to evacuation. But with the school closed and with many parents believing that the government was acting in their best interests, she must have been under great pressure to conform. Being made to send her children away was probably a torture for her, but on her visits we were aware only of her love and concern for us.

We were a close loving family, and evacuation was the last thing I needed. Indeed I suspect that it reinforced my love of town life. Since then the countryside has always been for me a somewhat alien environment. Although I have grown to admire nature through cycling, it has taken me fifty years to seriously consider living in a rural area.