

I try to grow up

It seemed that all the noisy relatives played solo, and the others just sat and talked (or knitted). Muriel and I would be in the bedroom (next room) trying to get to sleep, dreading when that moment came - the end of another game. All hell was let loose, recriminations and abuse freely distributed, until one of the quiet ones (mum) would remind them about us trying to sleep. When that didn't work, I would sometimes appear, bleary-eyed, at the door of the bedroom to make the point. The scene that greeted me was like an inferno, with wild-eyed people shouting and gesticulating and smoke everywhere.

There were other visitors, refugees from Germany with some distant connection. Many of these lived in a large house in West Hampstead; there was always an intensely intellectual atmosphere there. And a piano. With fervent debate raging, I once sat down and experimented on this strange monster. After a little while, it all went quiet, because, with one finger, I was playing the first subject of Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto. Mum was inundated with good advice (make sure he has lessons), but no-one seemed to notice that mum and dad couldn't possibly afford them. Another visitor was "Uncle" Mischa, also a refugee, who gave me a beautiful humming-top for my 6th (or 7th) birthday. He showed me how to make it spin and it made the most gorgeous noise, so serene. After a while, I took it out on to the (communal) porch to try it out. Tragedy struck! A jealous boy kicked it, and dented it - and the spinning-top sang no more.

When I was nine, the second world war and evacuation interrupted. (See separate document)

As children of poor parents, I think we benefited occasionally from "rich" uncles, in the way of presents. Later on I had a Hornby Meccano set, full of screws, nuts, girders, pulleys etc, which I thoroughly enjoyed. And, most significantly, a bicycle when I was 14. But, for the most part, we joined in the playground games with the children from the other 209 flats in "the buildings". Glarnies (marbles) was always popular, with a variation adapted to the sloping surface of the "porch" floor. This was races between marbles carefully wrapped in a silver-paper copy of the Thunderbird racing-car, which had just captured the world land-speed record. Another game was a sort of combination of cricket and baseball, using 4 pieces of firewood as a "wicket". This was called rounders, the bat being any handy piece of wood. There were also numerous ball games, played up against the window-less end-walls of each block of flats.

When that got too boring, there was always jumping on the buses outside the flats (where they slowed down for an unofficial stop) and leaving it as late as possible to jump off before either the bus got too fast or the conductor shouted at you. One day, waiting to jump off standing on the platform with one foot trailing, I suddenly found myself in a predicament. My trailing foot had somehow slipped under the platform, and I couldn't work out how to extricate it while the bus was moving. Since the bus was getting faster, I had to do something, so I let go, and got a nasty bump on the head for my troubles. I don't think I played that game any more.

Once a week we would go to the cinema at Dalston Junction, all the family together. There we saw films like Fantasia, Bambi and Victory Through Air Power (all Disney lies). Other days we would go to "the downs" (Hackney Downs - an open park) and play some bat and ball games.

Some time late in the 30's, Cousin Minnie came to live with us. She wasn't our cousin, and was a German-Jewish refugee. I seem to remember family arguments about who should "look after" her. In fact she was very independent, got a job in a local factory and paid her way. She was a great socialiser, but did find the language difficult. She loved the cinema, especially (as she called him) George Fromby. After a while, she did not live with us any more - had she become a detainee because of the war, I wonder?

My school-career, interrupted as it was by evacuation, continued at Sigdon Road until I was 11. Taking the junior county exam should have meant a place in the local grammar school. Since that was evacuated "in toto", and I was not about to leave home again, I went instead to a mixture of Central School (Laura Place) and secondary (Upton Manor), until I was 13. Laura Place, a girls' school, was co-ed for the emergency, and I quite enjoyed it there, especially the French lessons. We would be sitting in the classroom waiting for Mlle. Labadie, making the usual sort of din. Then someone would say "listen", and there, along the corridor, we could hear the tap-tap-tap of her stiletto heels getting nearer, and silence reigned. Upton Manor was a boys' school, with one or two quite sadistic people (ex-army) working there. I didn't enjoy it there. It seems that anything to do with PE was always organised by sadists. Another memory of Sigdon Road is to do with the local swimming baths. I was made to go in the water (ie pushed in) which ensured that I would never swim. Also, I would cower in the cloakroom rather than face the rigours of the gymnasium.