

Evacuation – Living With Strangers



When they arrived, at town square or village hall, children waited to be selected, and siblings were often separated for the first time in their lives. Their hosts ranged from warm and welcoming to begrudging and spiteful, whether they were working- or middle-class. Here a mother visits her children at a foster parent's large house in Hayward's Heath.

Travelling was limited but my mother made the long journey to Cornwall whenever she could at the weekend, going back overnight for war work on the Monday. She always wore a big hat with a downturned brim when she arrived. I loved that hat.

Plans for evacuation had been drawn up after Munich, known as Operation Pied Piper (did they not want to see those children again?) There had been enough preparation time to make it as straightforward as possible, and letters had been sent to parents as early as July explaining the process. So nobody could be in any doubt as to how seriously the government took the threat of war. Billeting was compulsory, and you could be taken to court and fined if you refused without good reason. You were normally paid 10/6 per child per week, about £25 in 2015 terms, and the parents had to contribute if they could afford it.

The welcome you got, the home you arrived at, the treatment by your hosts – and by their children – was largely pot luck. Often you fetched up going to several different and contrasting billets, as this girl did, though the number was unusual.

I went to eight in all. The first was a nice suburban house with a front gate decorated with a rising sun: the kind of house you'd read about in a book, immaculate, a picture cut out from magazine. The mother didn't like having a boy in the house: Kenny was sent outside in the cold when I had a bath. We walked across fields to school, and Ken came back ill in the daytime but the woman wouldn't let him in. It was freezing. He was given his clothes and a bucket of water and told to wash outside. When my father came to visit I told him I couldn't look after him any more, and he took him home. I was at Herts and Essex High in the afternoon. I'd always wanted a bike, but my mother had said it was too dangerous. I got to have one and I lived on it. The next billet was at Much Hadham rectory, very exciting, with 'Do not enter' in places as the house was falling down.

The next place was a hellhole, a dilapidated cottage in the middle of town, Dane Street. It had no heat or light, and I was too cold to take my clothes off. I slept on the floor, frozen. The third was a halfway house, lovely, posh, with all girls there. Mrs Jolly was just that, a delight; her husband was a Captain in the Army. She played Ivor Novello and Noel Coward records all day. It was classic Thirties. The fourth was a Miss Smith, an elderly spinster who'd been in service. There were six girls there, and we had lots of fun; the furniture was upturned fruit boxes. She had a quince tree and we made marmalade. Money was short, so in the end she had to take adults, soldiers, and we girls had to go.

The fifth was a Mrs Waterman, an elderly middle-class snob who took four of us. She considered the Evacuees as a different race, like Martians. We weren't allowed to sit on her dining chairs. She found a letter I'd written home describing her as a horrible old battle-axe, so off I went, gladly. I went to the sixth – with another Jewish girl, Helen – to a Mrs Rust on a council estate. Her husband and son were agricultural labourers, and she was wonderful. We had Matric coming up, and she did everything for us. She took everything to heart, and she refused to send us home with dirty washing. But we were too much for her really. I cycled home to London for the holidays, pretending I was over 14. The last was a Mrs Hood, strict, semi-detached, middle-class, who was ideal for Helen and me at that stage. I did German, English, Maths Pure and Applied. I was Jewish but by the end of the war I'd been to more different churches than any Christian.