

# Ten Refugees



Dutch child refugees crowd to the side of the ship that has brought them to Tilbury in 1945. Most such young refugees spoke no English on arrival, but learnt it with astonishing speed.

- Sunday 26 May To church. Mr and Mrs Watts to tea.
- Monday 27 Exams started. Elementary Design, two hours.
- Tuesday 28 Interned 8.50. Bromley station 2.15. Spent the night in Fulham.
- Wednesday 29 Woken at 4.30. Breakfast at 6. Left at 8.15. Night on ship.
- Thursday 30 Woken at 3.30. Started 6.10. Douglas at 10.45. Port Erin 1.15.
- Saturday 1 June First bathe in the sea.

**A**mong our informants there are ten who weren't born in Britain. One arrived at the beginning of the war from New Zealand at the age of five, returned home when the war was over, and came back to England permanently in the 1960s. One left England for her parents' native Australia at the start of the war, and returned when it was over and went to drama school in London. The remainder are from Europe, four of them from Germany. One of the German girls was sent here to learn English from Berlin as a 16-year-old in 1938–39, left to join her parents in South Africa just before Germany invaded Poland, and came back to England to live many years later. The others came to live here permanently either just before the war, in 1940, or in 1945. This chapter tells of their vicissitudes in their native countries, and their arrival in England.

I'd seen plenty of boats in Auckland harbour, but this was huge. By the time we reached the Red Sea the war had begun, the Suez Canal was closed, so we had to go via Cape Town instead. By that time I and others had contracted measles, so the ship was quarantined and we couldn't go ashore, which annoyed the other passengers. My mother should have received a telegram there from my father advising her to return to New Zealand, but it never arrived. We were still in quarantine and couldn't go ashore in Sierra Leone, but were clear by the time we reached Southampton on October 14th. Because of the war, my father hadn't been able to find out exactly when we would arrive, so he stayed in a bed and breakfast in Southampton and went down to the docks each day for news. I remember him taking us to a guest house, where my sister and I were put to bed in the small crowded bedroom, feeling bewildered. Even the water tasted funny. Every arrival in a new place seemed to happen in the middle of the night.

We went to Halfway Street School in Sidcup but most of its pupils had already been evacuated. The next was a convent school, a three-storey building which fascinated me – so many stairs. The buildings in New Zealand I'd known all had a single storey. I made the bus ride to school alone, carrying my gas mask like everyone else. Before long we had been evacuated to distant relatives who had a working farm outside Melton Mowbray. They were happy to take us rather than unknown London kids, with their reputation for lice and filthy habits.

Belgium had declared its neutrality in 1936, keen to avoid the destruction endured in World War I, and a year later Germany 'guaranteed' its neutrality. That remained its position once England and France declared war on Germany after the invasion of Poland. But on 10 May 1940 the Germans invaded France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium, and advanced at extraordinary speed to the coast. Belgium capitulated after ten days. This non-Jewish family living in Ostend decided to get out.

André and Denise were 13, me 12, Emile 7, and we lived before the war in a new suburb of Ostend called Den Opex. My mother had spent time in Wales so she'd developed the tea habit as well as a Welsh accent. One morning in May 1940 she woke us to say there was no school that day as war had broken out. We began to hear