

## **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 apalled 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!