

Chapter 2. The war years.

I was but a child when the war broke out in September 1939. I was eight years old. I remember being issued a gas mask, and being taught how to use it. To this day I can smell the rubber and feel the tightness of the mask. School life was disrupted, and I with my mother and two sisters and a few hundred other children were evacuated to Mauchline, a small town in Ayrshire, quite far from any potential target of German bombers. Mauchline was famous as the locale where the poet ‘Robbie Burns lived at one time. Thousands of children, all carrying packages with their gas masks and with a label identifying the name and location of home, some with mothers, descended on the railway station and boarded special trains. I only have vague memories of the village. We were billeted to the house of the “laird”, a very large, or seemed to me, mansion with extensive grounds. Somehow I must have got lost at one time in these grounds, since for years afterwards I have had dreams of wandering around glens and not being able to find my way home. The Glasgow evacuees were a rag tag bunch, coming mostly from working class families, children of shipyard and dock workers, the major industries of Glasgow at that time. I have no recollection of attending school there, and it is quite possible that I did not. After a few weeks when nothing happened, the so-called “phony war” we returned to Glasgow.

At that time we lived in what was called a tenement. These were massive multistoried (3-4) buildings, made out of either dark granite or reddish sandstone. One entered through the “close” and climbed up broken down stairs to reach the flat. In the back of the building there was a central court or square surrounded by four such tenements where we kids would play. This was also where the middens were kept. This was a poor neighborhood, and I distinctly remember my mother

taking great care that I should appear clean and well dressed, and not look like the ruffians of the neighborhood. We played games in this backyard, and mothers would throw their children “pieces”, the Glasgow slang for a slice of bread. “Maw, give us a piece”. We played “peeveer”, a sort of hop scotch and conkers with horse chestnuts. At the age of five I started in Scotland Street Elementary School.

I was fascinated by the night skies, they were all lit up with search lights looking for possible enemy bombers, and during the day there were grey and silver balloons (blimps) to entrap enemy planes. However nothing much happened. The news from Europe was dreadful, and I remember have a large map of Europe and with the help of my father putting pins marking the advances of the German army. Thus I learned European geography.

We were scared not only of the potential for bombings but also the fear of a German invasion and occupation. Being Jewish we were only too well aware of what might await us if the Nazi's occupied Scotland. We had quite a few German-Jewish refugees in our neighbourhood (we meanwhile had moved up in the world to a tenement in a slightly better area, from Pollok St, which today no longer exists to Dixon Avenue, near Queens Park.) and had heard horrible stories of what was transpiring in Europe. I remember some of these refugee families who had children approximately my age. I noticed how good looking the girls were. Also Grandma/Grandpa Taylor had taken in some refugees from Germany. I don't really remember whether they actually lived in my grand-parents house or in Barnett Taylor, my grandfather's brother's house. I remember the boy was called Norbet and he had a sister. I think the surname was Heller. I have no idea what happened to them.

Arrangements were made to house me with a Scottish family named Fraser if the Nazi's occupied the country. I never discovered any details of the

arrangement, but I know they would pretend I was their son if the worst did happen. I have attempted to find out more about them but unsuccessfully. All I remember was that they had a son also called Milton and that there was some Canadian connection. I have found a Hamish Fraser in Google who was a communist leader at the shipyards my father worked in, and he may have been the head of that family. There was talk of sending me and my sisters on one of the boats evacuating children to Australia, where we had distant relatives, cousins of my mother. Many of these ships were torpedoed on the way, and in retrospect staying in Scotland was undoubtedly the best decision.

For the first two years of the war very little happened in Glasgow. There were a few probing raids, lots of noise of anti-aircraft fire, and a few bombs. I still vividly remember coming out of a cinema with my mother (I do not remember the film, but it may have been the Mummy's Hand , because I know I was also frightened by the film) , while an air raid was going on. I remember the noise of ack-acks, the fear and the rush to get home. No announcement had been made and we were quite unaware of any raid.

In March of 1941 the raids started in earnest. This was after the blitzes on Liverpool and Manchester. The Germans worked their way systematically North. Glasgow was a prime target because of the docks. In two nights they hit Clydeside. A large area near the city, known as Clydebank and the Maryhill area of Glasgow were destroyed. After the first blitz, I wandered the streets near Ibrox marveling at all the people bandaged up and the destruction of houses, tenements with large gaps in them, and burnt out churches. This all seemed very exciting to a child of 10. Since we lived in close proximity to the river Clyde, my parents decided to spend the next few nights with my grandmother Taylor, who lived in an area ironically called Battlefield, further away from the river. The area was called

Battlefield because of the battle of Langside (near by) between the followers of Mary Queen of Scots and the Protestant supporters of her son James 1 of England (VI of Scotland). As expected there was another blitz the next night badly damaging the shipyards. I think it was during this air-raid that my Uncle David and family (on my mother's side of the family) were bombed out. Apparently the bomb hit the shelter, and every one inside was killed, whereas those who stayed in the building survived. The newly married David and Sadie lost everything, but at least they survived. The bombs most certainly did not hit their targets but a middle class residential area, Shawlands killing many people.

After this Glasgow was left very much alone. There were occasional other raids, one of which was a firebomb raid. Incendiaries fell around the brick shelter in the back yard in which we had taken refuge. I remember the terrifying screams of my sister and mother when the shelter door was opened and there were flames all around. For the moment we thought we would not be able to get out. Everyone was terrified. When we did get out the sky was completely red, and there were fires all around. We were now living in the Queens Park area, and a beautiful church just round the corner from Dixon Avenue was completely destroyed.

Despite all of this life continued normally (or so it seemed to a 10 year-12 year old child). I attended school, by this time Hutchie, and went to Cheder (Hebrew classes) after school ,at a synagogue in Niddrie Rd. I had Hebrew lessons, I assume in preparation for my barmitzvah, which would have been in December of 1944. I really do not remember very much about the event. I think it was held in the Marlborough, and I received the usual number of fountain pens ! As far as I know there are no existing photographs of the event. The war was still on and there was strict rationing.

I would visit my grandparents in Battlefield once a week. Kitty and Louis Flacks, with Cyril and Barry and later Irene lived downstairs from the grandparents, next to the Tonic cinema in Battlefield Rd. I remember Flora talking about her boy friend who was a prisoner of war, and I remember Minnie sending me out to buy some “ elbow grease” at the kiosk near the tramcar stop. My laziness must have been apparent at a very young age! My grandfather was doing very well with the factory producing uniforms for soldiers. However he died in the middle of the war (1942), and the factory was run by my uncles Norman and Louis. The house was always full of people, and my great grandmother Ellen (Ellke) always sat in a corner. She did not speak English and I was rather afraid of her. According to my records and I do not know if they are correct she died in 1946 at the age of 107. I find that hard to believe.

During the war my father worked as a riveter in the John Brown shipyards. This was the alternative to going into the army, since he had three children. Although the pay was not great, we some how survived, as did everyone else. As life improved, either because the war was winding down or there was an increase in prosperity, he would come home on Friday evening’s laden with fruit, and the visit to Ettingers, the delicatessen in the Gorbals was a major event every Sunday morning. I don’t think anywhere sold as good herring and pickles, and bagels, a luxury (also rare food) at that time.

As far as I remember my childhood was happy, despite the war. I had music lessons (piano), tap dancing, and at one time even Highland Dancing lessons, although this might have been later when I was about 14.

One disturbing thing that seemed to have made a deep impression was that towards the end of the war, or perhaps right after the end, my father was arrested and accused of dealing in black market cloth. Clothing and cloth were rationed.

And he was accused of buying and selling cloth on the Black Market. There was no real evidence against him, and the general impression was that he was arrested because he was Jewish. Whether this was true or not I do not know, but this was what was said at home. Luckily my mother's parents were wealthy enough to get a good lawyer, a Queen's counsel, and the case was dismissed. I think he spent a week in jail, during which time we lived with my grandparents. This was shortly after he re-opened his furniture store.