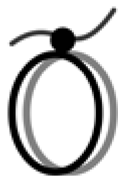


LOCKET BOOKS

life stories treasured

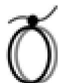
'Tis in my memory lock'd,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.

Hamlet (I.iii)

www.locketbooks.co.uk

Recollections

ROSEMARY BALL



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CHAPTER FOUR

A Wartime Childhood

I was four when the war broke out. I have a vague memory of being in the dining room with the family clustered around the wireless and it being very important that I didn't make a noise. Then of course nothing happened for a long time – what they called the Phoney War – but in late 1940 the air raids on Bristol began.

My father turned our basement into an air-raid shelter and my sister whitewashed all the walls. We had camp beds down there and I would be put to bed in the basement, wearing my pyjamas and my Siren Suit, so that I didn't have to be woken up in the night. A Siren Suit was like a onesie, but made out of heavy-duty cloth so you could go outside in it; the idea being that if you had your Siren Suit on you were ready for anything. Winston Churchill was famous for wearing his.

I don't remember being scared, because I didn't realise the danger we were in. I do remember that during one air raid the cat went into an old tea chest and produced a litter of four kittens.

I used to sit down in the shelter and Auntie Nan, who stayed with us during the war, would

With Auntie Nan, probably early in the war, c.1939

sit me on her lap. Every time she heard a bomb whistling on its way down, she would lean over to protect me and I would tell her, 'Don't keep doing that!' I found it really annoying!

The door to the cellar was off a long, narrow passageway that led to a bedroom. We had a white terrier called Tim and it turned out he could hear the German planes coming before the air-raid siren sounded. After a while, he got to know the routine and he would go and sit by the door to the cellar, waiting for it to be opened. My mother twigged that he could hear the planes before anyone else, so if she saw him sitting by the door she would round us up and get us all ready to go down into the cellar – Tim was our early warning system!

Bombing in Bristol

The Luftwaffe were aiming for the docks and the Filton Aerodrome on the other side of the city, but stray bombs inevitably fell on Clifton. The morning after a raid, we would walk down Whiteladies Road and find that some building or other wasn't there

anymore. An incendiary bomb hit our dustbin one night and we had to rush out with buckets of water to put the fire out.

At the end of our road was a shop called Garroways, which sold seeds and plants. It had a big area of land alongside it, full of greenhouses, and during one raid every single sheet of glass in the greenhouses shattered from a bomb blast.

The worst incident happened while I was evacuated. On the other side of the greenhouses was a big church and during an evening service that church was bombed. There was a very high death toll. The bomb blast blew out windows in houses near to me. People would put strips of brown paper on their windows so that if the glass did break in a blast, it wouldn't blow into the room.

Back in London, the houses opposite my grandparents' house in Bramber Road were destroyed one night by a bomb called a Land Mine. It took out the entire row and an awful lot of people were killed. It was perhaps a mercy that my grandparents weren't alive to witness the devastation.

The air raids in Bristol would often hit the water mains. Big water carts would come through the streets and you had to take water containers down and fill them up until the mains were repaired.

We had a home help called Dorothy – only a little older than my sister – who'd come to us because she rang the front doorbell one day looking for work. She was only a very young teenager, but she told Mum her father was out of work, they had a big family in a poor part of Bristol and she was desperate. Mum felt so sorry for her that she took her in as a housemaid and she became part of the family.

One day the water had gone and my sister and Dorothy took an old metal washtub with two handles down to the water cart to fill up. The plan was to use the water to have a bath, as neither had had a proper wash in who knows how long. It was quite a walk back up the hill with the water and they poured it all into big saucepans on the stove to heat up. Then, down the hill they went again, filled up and came back.

But when they came back after the third run, there was Mum on her hands and knees in the scullery, scrubbing the stone floor with their precious hot water. Peggy just could not believe it! Mum told her it needed doing – the floor hadn't been scrubbed in days. That was just typical of Mum. The housework came above everything else.

Evacuation

When the bombing became too intense, I was evacuated to 27 Ox Lane, Harpenden, to live with a former colleague of my father's: Mr Evans, his wife and two children, Gillian and David. I was five. I can remember my father saying to me at teatime one day, 'Would you like to go and live in the country?' and I said 'No, thank you.'

Other than that, my parents didn't explain to me what was about to happen. I knew I was to go with my father on one of his work trips, because I heard my mother talking about it, but I didn't realise I was to be left there.

My father stayed the first night and the next

morning I was playing in another room when he poked his head in and said, 'Bye-bye, Tuppence' – that's what he used to call me. I was startled because I didn't realise he was going, but it meant I didn't have time to get upset!

There were no phones, but every so often the family would help me write a letter home. I wasn't too homesick, but I didn't feel as if I really belonged in the family. One day an aunt came and brought Gillian a new doll's pram and David a set of toy soldiers, but of course there was nothing for me. New toys were terribly hard to come by and I felt very left out.

I didn't love it, but life ticked on and I coped. Thankfully, I was there less than a year, as by Christmas the raids in Bristol had died back. I arrived home the day before Christmas Eve and all I wanted to do was get in and see the dog. My mother didn't matter, my aunt didn't matter; I just wanted to see Tim!

Aged seven, 1943

Community spirit

Everybody had to do something to help. Auntie Nan and my sister Peggy did fire duty. They used to go out in shifts during the night, and if they saw a fire they would call the fire brigade or try to put it out themselves with stirrup pumps.

My father had an interest in medicine and was Red Cross trained, so he chose to help out on the ambulances. He'd go down to the research station for 9am – two bus rides away – come home at 5pm, have his tea, get changed and go off to the ambulance depot. Sometimes he didn't get back until the next morning, dusty, dirty and covered in grime, but off he would go to work again. Everybody did the same; they pulled their weight. There was a real spirit of cooperation. No one whinged about the war, they just kept at it. Even at a young age, this spirit really struck me. When I came back from Canada in '57, I noticed it had gone. Everyone had gone back to moaning and complaining – I really missed it.

Shopping and rationing

Hitler was not going to interfere with Mum's shopping. Incredibly, the shops still opened and just sold whatever they'd got. There was a determination to keep life going. Food was, of course, rationed and you had clothing coupons: one coupon bought you four handkerchiefs.

It would be a bit of an outing to go shopping in the city centre; we would troop down with our gas masks slung across our shoulders in little boxes and perhaps go to Carwardine's tearoom, for a treat.

There was a restaurant just round the corner from us called Caroline's, they'd been going for donkey's years, and their cakes were to die for. Ooh, to go out for afternoon tea at Caroline's was the height of luxury! Fondant fancies, meringues… rum babas! Later on in the war they had a scheme where if you took them a two-pound bag of sugar and a half-pound block of margarine, they would make you a birthday cake – oh, they were yummy!

We were allowed three ounces of chocolate

or sweets per week, but you had to take what was going, there wasn't that much choice. My favourites were probably something like bull's eyes or pear drops – something that I could suck and would last.

You couldn't get bananas, oranges or lemons during the war. I remember one day I was on a bus in London with Mum and one of my aunts, and a soldier got on. He'd obviously just come back from Africa and he was carrying a whole stem of green bananas. Everybody was amazed and we were so jealous when he took one off and gave it to the conductress!

But we never went hungry. My very favourite meal – almost to this day – was new potatoes (and in those days new potatoes had the most beautiful flavour, which you can seldom get these days) and a fried egg! Oh, I thought that was IT!

You couldn't shop just anywhere, you had to be registered at a grocery store and take your ration book with you, to make sure you didn't cheat and get double. My cousin Bill was in the RAF and when on leave he would turn up on the doorstep

without warning. Of course, the first thing my mother would say was, 'Oh, I haven't got any food in the house!' So Bill and his friend would go up to our local Home and Colonial grocery store, sweet-talk the manager there and come home with all sorts of things to placate my mother.

On one of Bill's visits, in about 1944, he brought his fiancée to meet us. It was summertime and we were walking along the footpaths near Clifton Suspension Bridge, when suddenly the dog went missing. We all began searching and finally found a crowd of people at a sharp bend in the path, looking over the cliff. It was Tim. He had been chasing a rabbit and had leapt right over the low, Victorian metal fence. Miraculously he had landed on a tiny ledge, six feet below the clifftop, with a sheer drop below. Well, we all had kittens. I was begging Bill to go down and rescue him, but Father told him not to and of course Joan, his fiancée, told him under no circumstances was Bill to go down!

Fortunately there was an army camp about 100 yards away and Peggy and I went rushing over

to get help. Three soldiers came back with ropes, one of them abseiled down, tucked Tim under an arm and pulled him up.

Vitamins and stocking dye

For vitamins, we children were given concentrated orange juice which came in a bottle with a label saying 'Ministry of Food'. And we had rosehip syrup – I used to be given a teaspoon of that every day. One evening, I was reading and a spoon suddenly appeared in front of me. Without looking, I lifted up my head and opened my mouth but, as soon as it was in, I knew it wasn't rosehip syrup. I made frantic gestures at my mother who went out to investigate and it turned out to be stocking dye! Stockings were hard to come by during the war and if you had odd ones you would dye them so they were all the same colour. Mum had got her bottle of stocking dye mixed up with the bottle of rosehip syrup on the kitchen shelf! Luckily my father, being a chemist, read the label and said it would probably be okay, but in the night I was horribly sick.

As well as research into pesticides and fungicides, one of the things they were doing at Long Ashton Research Station was to try to develop fruits and vegetables with greater nutritional value – all part of their work to help feed the nation. A scientist there, Dr Charlie, was working on blackcurrants and my father used to come home with these massive bottles of blackcurrant juice to test out on me. It was good stuff! At the end of the war, Dr Charlie sold his patent to Beecham's and we got Ribena. So I was a Ribena baby!

Life goes on

I was given freedoms that children today don't have because there was so little traffic and it really was very safe to go outside to play. When I was about eight, I was allowed to walk to the local swimming baths on my own. Mum would tell me to be home at a certain time, but I didn't have a wristwatch and there wasn't a working clock at the swimming baths, so I never knew what the time was and I was always late.

There was a jewellery shop called Crumps on the corner of our road – next to the place where the greenhouses were – and it had a clock above the doorway. I used to hurtle around the corner, look at the clock and, sure enough, I would be late! I would dive home and there was my mother, waiting for me: 'Where have you been?!'

The last time I went back to Bristol, I walked down that road. The shop is not a jewellery shop anymore but the clock's still there, and as I looked at it, the thought that popped into my head was: 'Late again, Rosemary!'

School carried on throughout the war. My school, Redland High School for Girls, was in a big old manor house so, again, if the siren went we were all trooped down into the cellars under the school. In fact my sister did her last year exams in the cellars because of the raids.

I had Wednesday afternoons off and I used to go to Bristol Zoo. A woman called Megan, who would later own the riding stables I used to go to, gave children rides on a Dartmoor pony. I got talking to her because I loved horses and after a

while I was allowed to help. So, every Wednesday afternoon, I would go to the zoo, tack up and walk children around on a little Shetland pony called Toby. In Easter 1945, my picture was in the *Bristol Evening Post* giving children rides.

With no TV – or screens of any kind (imagine that, grandchildren!) – trips to the cinema were the highlight. There would be a newsreel, a main film, a B picture (perhaps a less well-known film, or a cowboy film), and maybe a couple of short documentaries – the whole programme lasted about three hours. We didn't care what time it started, you just went in and if you came in halfway through, you sat until the end and then waited for the beginning to start again.

It was often Auntie Nan who took me and I would beg her to stay and keep watching, she would have to drag me out! I particularly remember *The Thief of Baghdad* – I thought the bit where the genie came out of the bottle was fantastic, and I remember being dragged up the aisle as I watched it over my shoulder!

In 1947, I passed the 11 Plus exam and

Leading Toby the Shetland pony at Bristol Zoo in 1945, photo taken by the Bristol Evening Post

moved to Colston's Girls' School – the one whose founder's statue was pulled down and thrown into the River Avon in 2021, due to his connection with the slave trade.

Soldiers in the city

I used to see soldiers in uniform in Bristol all the time. If they had a bright blue uniform on, it meant they had been in hospital and were convalescing but were allowed out to walk around the town. If they were in a sort of khaki colour with a diamond-shaped patch on their backs, they were German prisoners of war, and if they behaved themselves they were also allowed to walk around the town.

We had a little local railway station and you could go down there and watch trains go past that were full of prisoners of war – German and Japanese – looking very glumly out of the carriages, but they were very lucky to be prisoners here and not on the Russian front or somewhere. There were big prisoner-of-war camps in the outskirts of Bristol. Of course, we didn't know anything about

the concentration camps or anything like that at that time.

A lot of the POWs worked on the farms and there were two Germans who worked in the stables where I had lessons. Horse riding was my one treat: I didn't have pocket money, but I was allowed to have an hour's horse-riding lesson a week, for three shillings and sixpence.

One of the men seemed nice, he didn't really want to be in the war at all, but the other wasn't a pleasant man and he married Megan, the owner of the riding stables, just to stay in England. That was a big disgrace; her parents practically disowned her. Eventually they moved to Germany, I think.

One day, when I was about 12, he told me he wanted to show me a trick. 'Stand behind me and put your arms around my middle,' he said. So, I did that – and he stubbed a cigarette out on my hand.

Years later, when we were in Canada, Auntie Nan used to send us the papers and one day there was a letter in the *Daily Mirror*, from my riding-school teacher, saying something along the lines of:

'My husband says all this about the concentration camps is nonsense.' The letter caused an uproar and journalists went to interview them both. The report that was published had a picture of him from the war – wearing an SS uniform.

D-Day and the Americans

One day, I remember looking out the front window of 3 Chantry Road, and there were soldiers with machine guns stationed all along the road, even in people's front gardens. Clifton College was nearby and it was full of American soldiers. I think they must have been doing rehearsals for D-Day, because there was a period of a couple of months where they would just appear on street corners, set up machine-gun nests and were obviously rehearsing for something big.

Then, I remember standing in a big crowd watching all the soldiers march off to be put on the boats. Within about a week it was all cleared and Clifton College was empty again.

The Americans were very smart in comparison

to our soldiers; they had well-cut uniforms in good materials. There was a lot of fraternising, of course. A highlight one week for me was seeing my sewing teacher, Miss Ferguson, walking hand in hand with an American soldier – scandalous!

After the bombing was over and my father no longer had to work on the ambulances, he liked to go down to his local pub, The Shakespeare, a couple of nights a week. He'd say he was walking the dog. I think he met Canadian and American servicemen there and several of them were invited home. I particularly remember an American soldier who was called Kermit Munroe. Well! I thought that was the oddest name I had ever heard!

Kermit Munroe used to come around quite often for Sunday dinner and his wife sent us parcels from America. One gift I'll never forget was a little red dress: it had a red plaid skirt, a plain red top and a little red plaid jacket. It looked like it was all separate, but it was all in one and I'd never seen anything like it – I loved it! But it was too big for me. My mother said I had to put it away until I grew into it. I always seemed to be waiting to grow

into things in those days.

Mrs Munroe also sent dried fruit, sweets, tinned salmon – I particularly remember that, because it was such a luxury – and teabags. It was the first time we had ever seen teabags and we had no idea what you did with them!

VE Day

A buzz went around in early May 1945 that something big was going to happen. I remember asking my very elderly Sunday-school teacher, who still dressed as if she was Queen Mary, if the war was really over and she said, 'Yes, I think it is, Rosemary.' The war in Europe finally ended on 8th May, which also happened to be my tenth birthday. It couldn't have been more special.

To celebrate, I tried to paint the mudguards of my bicycle red, white and blue but I couldn't do it because I only had water paints. Instead, I painted a big Union Jack, which I hung out of the front-room window.

In the evening, we went down to my father's

pub – it was on the corner of a little street of Victorian workers' cottages which cost a small fortune now – and every front door was open and everybody was in everyone else's houses. The bar was open, the drinks were flowing and someone had got a wind-up gramophone out – people were dancing and singing in the street. It was the first time I remember my parents really letting their hair down and allowing me to join in. It was just terrific!

War is over. With mum and dad in 1946

With Tim, our early warning system, 1946