

Written by Kathleen Vera Purbrick

My Life in World War Two

For Georgina

September 3rd 1939 was a bright sunny day with not a cloud in the sky, then at 11 o'clock in the morning there came an announcement on the radio that England was at war with Germany. It was about five weeks before my tenth birthday, and we children didn't understand just what war meant. We had heard about the Great War in 1914 and our fathers had been in the Army then, fighting, but to us it was just words, just as the stories of World war Two are to today's children.

After the news that we were at war, everyone came out and stood on their doorsteps, not knowing what to do although everyone had known that war would be coming.

The church hall across the road had been turned into an Air Raid Precaution place called an A.R.P Post, where men in navy blue uniforms kept sandbags and things for if anyone got bombed out of their houses. I remember going to post a letter for my mum when the sirens went off and a lady who was standing at her doorway crying. I rushed home but the all clear then went and we were quite relieved to hear that it was only for practice. Mum had collected all of our insurance policies and our birth certificates and put them in a tin box to keep safe then always took them to the air raid shelter with her.

We had all been given gas masks to wear if there should be a gas attack, and we had to try them on to see that they fitted. They were horrible ugly things which smelt of rubber and made you feel as if you were suffocating, yuk; but we had to take them everywhere with us in a little cardboard box with a string shoulder strap. If you went to school without it you would be sent home to fetch it, then when we had gasmask drill we would have to try them on, ugh; we also had identity cards with our name, age, and address on they were blue and we were all given an identity number – I can still remember mine it was CKFF/95/5. I don't know what the first numbers meant but the last one, 5, meant that there were four other people in the family older than me. The first number 1, being head of the household, which was usually the father.

At first the schools were closed while air raid shelters were being built, so we had a bit of a longer holiday. Lots of children were evacuated, sent off to live in the country, but my mum said no for me to go, she said if a bomb has our name on it then we will all die together. First when the schools were closed while air raid shelters were being built, and at that time the air raids hadn't begun, people who had a large front room and lived near to a public air raid shelter were asked if they would allow a class of a few school children to use it, with a teacher, for a few lessons, so my mother said they could use our front room. It wasn't really big enough for many children but a few came about twice a week for some lessons, and as we had a piano which I was learning to play, the children sometimes had singing lessons and my mum

used to like to listen to them singing. After a few weeks the schools reopened and all the children went back, our holiday was over. Luckily at the start of the war there weren't any air raids at first.

For the first year there were not any air raids to start with, then the German planes began to attack the airfields and as Biggin Hill airfield was not so very far away, we could see the planes flying round each other and weaving in and out and firing at each other in the sky. These were called dog fights and it was impossible to know which planes were ours or the Germans, so whenever we saw one fall to the ground with a trail of smoke behind it we felt sad and hoped it wouldn't be one of ours. Sometimes a plane would fly over and turn upside down and rollover in a somersault – this was known as a victory roll and then we would know that a German plane had been shot down.

Next came the rationing, we were given ration books which had little squares on the pages, so when you went shopping you took your ration book with you, and the man in the shop (we didn't have supermarkets then, you had to go up to the counter and wait to get served) stamped the square to show that you bought your allowance of that type of food for the week. We were allowed two ounces of butter and four ounces of margarine, two ounces of tea (they didn't have teabags then), and about four ounces of sugar, I can't remember how much meat we were allowed but it wasn't much. My job was to queue up outside the butcher's shop on Saturday mornings very early before the shop opened because if the butcher had some liver or kidneys which were not on ration then they would be sold to the first customers. Most people grew their own vegetables, there were slogan signs like 'Dig for Victory', so if you had a garden it was handy for growing vegetables or keeping chickens and rabbits for food and extra eggs – sometimes we only got one egg each week for each person on the ration allowance. Bread wasn't rationed until the very end of the war and I think fish wasn't rationed if you could get it. Restaurants and cafes were open. Also fish and chip shops. Sweets were rationed and you had coupons for each week to get them but you didn't get many, there were some toffee sweets that you could buy which weren't on ration but they tasted horrible so goodness knows what they were made of.

Then there was the blackout; No one was allowed to have a light showing from their windows, my father made a frame covered with black material which he fixed on the inside of the window every night and took down again in the morning. If anyone had even a small chink of light showing you would hear the air raid warden shout "Put that light out" then bang on the door. Cars also had to have their headlights covered with just a slit of light pointing on to the ground, but there weren't so many cars on the roads then because most people couldn't afford them and those who could found it difficult to get petrol which was also rationed and in short supply. Some people used to steal petrol from other people's cars, they would put a rubber tube in the petrol tank and siphon some of the petrol out into a container. The street lights were not put on either so it was very dark out at night, unless the moon was shining. The name signs were removed from towns and villages, this was in case the Germans invaded then they wouldn't know where they were but luckily this never happened. The church bells were not allowed to be rung either as this was meant to be a sign that an invasion had happened.

People were given air raid shelters. If you had a garden you had an Anderson shelter which you could put in your back garden. The family had to dig a very deep oblong shape hole, then you put the shelter (which was made of corrugated iron or steel and had a curved top) in the hole, then bolted the top sides together. Most people then covered the top with earth which they had dug out, then let grass grow on the top so from the air it would look like a little mound. We put benches in our shelter and mattresses so when the air raids were very bad we just used it as our bedroom and slept there all night. We all felt very scared listening to the planes overhead and the sound of the bombs making a whistling, screaming noise as they came down, hoping they wouldn't fall on us or our houses. I used to put my fingers in my ears until I heard the explosion. Sometimes they fell not far away and a boy from my school had one fall on his house. His brother was killed and Reggie (that was his name) was injured and lost one of his ears so I heard. His family then moved away. When a bomb fell near there would be a very loud explosion so after the all clear went, when the raid was over, we would look out from the shelter not knowing whether our houses would still be there. It was a big relief to see that it was but some people were not so lucky.

Sometimes there weren't many raids, perhaps for about an hour in the evening, and if it was quite early we would occasionally go to the public shelter just round the corner. This was in the cellar of two shops which had been made stronger, and was big enough to take quite a few people. Several families used to go there and it was something like a social meeting – if you could ignore the sound of the big guns which were kept in the Crystal Palace Park firing up to the German planes, and the sound of bombs whistling down. Old ladies used to take their knitting and we would all have a sing song to drown out the noise. Those who didn't have gardens were given a shelter made of iron or steel which looked like a very strong and very large table, large enough for someone to sleep under, so that should your house collapse it would protect you. We lived near to the railway line at Crystal Palace and as railways were targets for bombs there were big guns kept in the Crystal Palace Park which were really loud in the air raids. Sometimes after we had gone to bed, just as you were getting to sleep, the sirens would go off and then it was a quick run to the shelter in the garden. When the all clear sounded we would go back to bed, perhaps only to be woken again by another raid, so not much sleep on those nights, especially if it happened more than twice as it sometimes did. Sometimes the planes would be overhead before the sirens went off then we couldn't get out to the shelter, so we went down to the basement of our house and sat in the cupboard under the stairs, as people began to notice that when houses got bombed the stairs were almost always left standing, so people felt safe there. Thinking back now it wasn't such a bright idea as we kept the coals for our fires in there and we used to cover it with paper and sit there until it would be safe to get to the shelter. If a firebomb had landed on our house then we would have been burnt to a crisp, but we didn't think of that then.

All of us children had a tin box and the next day after the raids we used to go round the streets looking for shrapnel, this was pieces of metal from the bombs which had fallen and exploded the night before. We would collect any bits we found, and when we got together with our friends we would see who had found

the biggest pieces. I heard quite recently in a television programme that German children did this too. Everyone was asked to do their bit for the war effort and one of the wardens they called 'Ritchie' got all the kids from our road together and took us round with a sack and barrow collecting tins, papers and old woollen clothes that were not wanted and worn out. We took it to the empty shop which was above the public air raid shelter, where it was sorted out and collected to be recycled and made useful again. So you see recycling is not really new. They even took away the iron railings from outside of houses to recycle and use for the war. Ritchie also got a lot of the kids from the neighbourhood together and got us to give concerts. Some kids could dance and the rest of us got together and sang songs, anything to cheer people up. We once gave a concert to some soldiers who had been wounded fighting in the war and sent home to get better. They were staying in a large building which before the war was used as a training college for blind people. We probably weren't very good entertainers but they seemed to like it.

One Thursday lunchtime when I was walking home from school along Hawthorn Grove I noticed people running along the road but didn't realise that behind me there was a German plane firing guns at people walking along the street. They put some bullets into a shop at the end of the street and I think someone was injured but not badly, then the plane flew off then fired on people in Lewisham and Peckham.

When I was fourteen I left school and went to work in a factory in Croydon. The war was still on and the factory made uniforms for the navy. They were called Duck suits, I don't know why but they were white suits made of tough material called drill, and they were for sailors to wear in hot countries. The war had been going on for four or five years then and we still had air raids, although not so badly as the Blitz. Then there was a new type of bomb called a buzz bomb or a doodlebug. It looked like a plane with fire coming out of the back of it, but it wasn't a plane. It didn't have a pilot and was guided by something like remote control. It sounded very much like a motorbike, then the engine would cut out and there would be silence, except for the sound of it whistling through the air as it fell down then exploded. Often it would sound right overhead when the engine cut out, but the explosion could be a few miles away, you never knew just where they would fall. One day just before we finished work the sirens went and we all went down to the shelter. We heard a doodlebug overhead then the engine cut and it went quiet, we were relieved when the explosion sounded quite far away but felt sorry for the people who lived where it would have exploded. The all clear went and I went and caught my bus home. I lived near the Crystal Palace then and the buses used to go from Croydon right up to the top of the hill at Crystal Palace where they then turned round to go back to Croydon. When the bus got to Thicket Road, two stops before the end of the journey, we all had to get off because that last doodlebug had fallen in the road at the bottom of Anerly Hill and a lot of people had been killed. There were people who had just finished working in the factory in the Crystal Palace and were waiting at the bus stop or were coming from the station. The rows of shops on both sides of the road had come down and under one of them was the shelter where we sometimes went from the air raids. Two local boys that I knew had been sheltering in there and were killed by the blast from the bombs. They had been sitting on the stairs leading down to the shelter and

were buried in the rubble. It took two or three days to dig them out. My mum had been walking down the hill home from work and because it was high up she was able to see the doodlebug fall so went back up the hill. Afterwards she had to walk through all the rubble to get home and she saw an arm lying in the road, she was really upset by it.

After I got off the bus and walked up the first hill to home a warden stopped me and said 'you can't go any further we are not allowing people to go up here' but I said I lived there and was very worried because at that time I didn't know what had happened, so he had to let me through, then when I got home I found that the bomb had dropped just around the corner from our road. Some of the windows had been blown out and most of the ceilings had fallen down and plaster come off the walls. There was dust and dirt everywhere. But at least we were alive and safe. After the doodlebugs came the rockets called V2. We didn't know it then but this was the beginning of the Jet age. The V2 rockets were propelled by Jet engines and made no noise when they came over, nor was there any warning that they were coming. The first you knew was a big flash like lightening and then the explosion. The first one I saw was when I was out with my friend and we saw this big flash then heard the explosion, we were very scared as we didn't know what it was and had never seen or heard anything like that before, so rushed home as fast as we could. I found out later that it had fallen on a row of houses at South Norwood and relations of my cousin's husband had been killed when it fell on their house.

The war in Europe ended on the 8th May 1945. Hitler had been beaten and had killed himself. Everyone was out in the street dancing and singing. There were street parties for the children, then later the grown-ups were out dancing and singing. It was good to have the street lights come on again and to be able to have a good night's sleep safely in our beds.