

## Written by Maggy Read

Before I begin this story I should perhaps explain the situation that had arisen at that time. It was 1939 and Hitler had invaded many countries and had taken France. So, the Germans were only miles away from the English Coast. My mother and father had really thought that the Germans would invade and it seemed very likely at that time.

My father had a cousin, Rex Petley, he was the son of the grandmother's sister Army, and had answered an advertisement many years before the Company Secretary to Union Telefonica in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He had got the job and became quite wealthy. He married Olga, many years his junior. She was a beautiful woman and a great asset to him in this job. They had a flat in Buenos Aires and also a Villa in Uruguay and a family estancia in Merlo. They had no children of their own.

Obviously my brother who was 9 and I was 6, were not really aware of what was going on at that time, I certainly did not answer. Rex had written to my father and mother stating that if they thought it wiser we should be sent to the Argentine away from the war. My mother and father obviously deliberated for quite some time before the decision was taken to send Peter and I to Buenos Aires.

We travelled up to London one night quite late, it was July 1940 with my mother and father, grandfather Pom Pom and Grandma came as well to wave us goodbye. I remember being put on a train with Peter and standing at the window and waving to them just as if we were going for a couple of days. The significance of this event did not register at that time. The train set off leaving parents and grandparents almost certainly upset – it must have been a very difficult time for my mother and I now realise how very brave she was. I could not have done this myself with my children. The train travelled off to Swansea, but my parents were not told where we were going to sail from – this was part of the war and people were not allowed to be told anything. There were U-boats in the Atlantic sinking as many ships as they could and it was dangerous.

I recall seeing this very large liner – it was in fact a Blue Star Luxury Liner called The Avila Star. Peter and I were settled in to a small cabin with bunk beds and a small porthole.

The voyage was exciting and we ran riot on this ship – Peter mainly being an adventurous child and I followed him everywhere he went. It was whilst we went through the Bay of Biscay that I was very sea sick and remained in my bunk for days, feeling very ill. Poor little soul I was only 6 years old and did not have my mother to comfort me. The journey passed and we enjoyed it – there were games played on board and I can recollect where we went over the equator that people were thrown into the swimming pool and I hid out of the way, as this was the tradition for people that crossed the line for the first time. I could not swim at that time anyway and was quite frightened.

During the journey we stopped at various ports. I can recollect stopping somewhere at some islands I think the Asencion Islands and watching small boys diving off their small boats to dive for money which we had thrown. We also stopped in Brazil with a Cross on the mountain in Rio de Janeiro. We stopped at Penanbuco on the way back.

Eventually the day came after about 3 or so weeks, when we sailed up the Rio de la Plata, (River Plate) into Buenos Aires – it was at night and the lights twinkled all around – it was very pretty. Rex and Olga met us in a very large care with a chauffeur (I later found out his name to be Domingo). We arrived at the apartment in Ruffino del Isalde and were given milk and biscuits. The maid said to me ‘a dormir’ putting her hands to the side of her face to demonstrate that I was to go to bed. The next morning was I think the 25 August which was Peter’s birthday and I was given a wrapped book to give him.

I can hear Olga saying to me that we really must do something about my hair, it was rather long and I don’t think I had combed it much on the journey. So the very next day she took me to the hairdressers and I had a bob with a fringe and that was my hairstyle for the remainder of my stay. Olga also took me many big department stores, Gath y Chaves and Harrods as I recollect and bought me many lovely dresses and other necessities.

Peter was soon sent to boarding school at St. George’s but because I was only 6 I was not able to go to boarding school straight away and had to wait until I was 7. However, I did have private lessons every day with a lady called Miss Stevenson. Domingo took me in this huge care and I sat at the back on a large seat and felt very small. I did not get on very well with Miss Stevenson, she was kind enough but I did not progress very well especially with Maths. Eventually I was old enough to go to St. Hilda’s College, which was in Hurlingham and not very far from Buenos Aires. It all seemed so big to me and I was shown to a dormitory, which was all painted pink, and all the bedspreads were pink. Strange to say it was called the Pink Dorm. There were about 10 beds in a large room, 5 down each side and at the end was a door, which was into Mrs Donaldson’s room. She was a teacher but also slept in that room so was on call during the night if any of us needed her. I used to cry sometimes at first – I had a picture of mother and father on my bedside table. Eventually I became accustomed to being at the boarding school and was sometimes naughty and had midnight feasts under the bedclothes – it was probably not anywhere near midnight but it seemed that to me. Also I recollect that we would talk and tell ghost stories to each other until Mrs Donaldson would come in and tell us off.

Schooldays were generally very happy and I settled in to the life in a boarding school. Routine was up at a certain time and all our night clothes had to be folded and the bed made before we went to a large hall for breakfast. If one was late you had to go up on the stage at prayer time and say why you were late, something like one couldn’t find one’s knickers. I think I only had to go up once and I soon learned to get cracking in the morning when called and leave the bed tidy.

Lessons were mainly English in the morning and Spanish in the afternoon. My Spanish came on in leaps and bounds and I soon spoke it more than English. However, there were more English girls there than Spanish but we seemed to speak Spanish quite often.

My main pleasure in school was games and gym. I loved it and was quite good at most sports that I tried. I could run very fast, do high jumps and long jump. We played hockey and tennis and I was

allowed to play on the practice wall at weekends when the other girls went home, which I did not often do. Rex and Olga were often away as Rex was doing fund raising for the war and eventually was awarded an OBE.

Holidays were heaven. Some weekends we went to Merlo, which was not very far from Buenos Aires. It was a smallish estancia with a permanent hand and maid/cook employed by the Herrera family. Jesusa and Rex. There was a big house for the main family and a small bungalow where Luis and Tilly and their children stayed. Rex and Jesusa had another small bungalow near the big house. There would sometimes be 20 of us staying there. The grown up had assados (barbecue) and they would send us to bed and then party all night – we would watch out of the bedroom windows.

They would roast a whole cow at a time. Sometimes on Sundays the whole family 20 or so would sit outside under the tree on a large trestle table for lunch and we were allowed to drink wine and water.

There were horses there and one particular horse, Whiskey, who was white and I think a bit old. We children, Susanna, Nonora, Mimi, and I and sometimes the boys would ride this poor old horse. We would go out into the field to catch him and he knew and would do all he could not to be caught. Eventually we would get him and would ride three or four at a time. Once he objected and put his head down over a hedge and we all fell off into the hedge. Often we would go into the fields of maize and try to climb, ombu trees with big thick trunks and easy to climb.

Our main holiday was usually taken in Uruguay, Punta del Este. Olga would take her car to Buenos Aires Port and the car would be hoisted onto a big ship and put down in the hold. We slept on the boat and would arrive the next day in Montevideo, where Olga's mother and father had a house. They also had a house in Belgrano in Buenos Aires. Anyway we would motor in Olga's car, which had a dickey at the back, two seats, and sometimes we were allowed to sit in that. We would arrive eventually at La Case Rosada right near the sea. Down some steps and there was the sea and beach. Olga often went there with us without Rex and he would be away on important business. He did come there sometimes for his holidays. The cook, Ida, and the butler, Estefan usually came with us as part of their holiday, although they still cooked and did things but it was funny to see Estefan bobbing up and down in the sea, all you could see was his white hat. They even took the dog, black and white Pekinese called Pluto.

We had many adventures in Uruguay. One I recollect was when Peter and I borrowed a horse without telling anyone and rode along the sands for miles. Then suddenly the horse started to go down into quick sand – Peter had the presence of mind to tell me to jump off quickly and he did the same. Fortunately the horse managed not to go down – struggled quite a bit and eventually we got back on and rode back feeling quite subdued – imagine what would have been said if we had gone down – no one would have known where we were and never a trace would have been found – what a terrible thought. One of my nine lives I think.

There was a large windmill in the garden of Casa Rosada by the sea and we climbed it often right to the top – very dangerous but quite exciting. One day Peter suggested that I should ride a sheep – he

put a coat over the poor creature's head and I duly climbed on (I had no shoes – I hardly ever did). He slowly lifted the coat off and the sheep ran at a rate of knots – unfortunately he ran the whole way close to the brick wall and my foot scraped along the wall nicely and was quite bloody when I eventually fell off! This was the story of my life doing what Peter told me to.

One summer Peter and I went up to my Aunt's brother-in-law's estancia in Cordoba. It was so big that my 'uncle' had to leave on a Monday to check the fences and did not return until Friday, it took that long to check perimeters. We rode horseback with the gauchos and 'helped' them round up the cows. They were dipped in a trough of disinfectant.

We had a lovely life in Argentina, there was always something to do outdoors, climb, play games, ride horses.

Time passed by – school – holidays – lots of sun, swimming etc.

In 1945 the war in Europe was nearly over and I remember being on a swing at the time when my 'cousins' said I was to go back to England. I said I did not want to go.

The time came and we were taken to a dock and boarded 'The Highland Princess' which had been taken over by the Army and there were about 500 soldiers on board coming back from La Tierra de Fuego (down near the Falklands). I had to sleep in a hammock on top of 3 others in a very large area with about 100 other women and children. Peter was in a similar area with the men.

We had a good time on board and I used to go down to the sailors' mess and play what they called 'housey housey' which I now know to be bingo.

We eventually arrived back in Liverpool. I stood on the deck with Peter – looked down to the quay and sat my Mother and Father. I was horrible – I said I did not want to speak to them.

We stayed that night in Liverpool in a hotel and I slept in the same room with my Mother and Peter with Dad. She wanted to come into the bathroom and bath me – I was then 12 and said I didn't need her – I could manage. She thought I was 6 I suppose.

Life was very difficult – settling down to English life. There was rationing then in England and I had no idea of this as there was always plenty to eat in Argentina. Peter and I spoke Spanish and were able to plot and plan in front of our parents without them having any idea of what we were saying. Peter was sent away to boarding school and I missed him.

It took me a long time to get back any sort of relationship with my Mother but we got there in the end.

I have never been back and would like to but probably never will.

War disrupted many children and family life – many children were evacuated to Canada/Australia and many other places. It did affect me and I am very independent to this day – I had to manage quite suddenly at 6 to look after myself on the boat and from 7 years old in boarding school.