

Written by Rita Lewis

Blitzed & Evacuated

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In the spring of 1901 my maternal grandparents arrived in England. They had come from a small town north of Kiev called Gomel. It was in White Russia, now called Belarusse. They brought with them their six children aged eleven years to the baby aged eighteen months, my mother. They also brought with them many household goods needed to set up home here. I know this to be true because I have, still in use, my grandmother's Russian rolling pin.

They settled in the East End of London, as many new immigrants have done for centuries. By the early nineteen twenties they were doing well. Their three eldest children had immigrated to the USA and they were living in a four story house in Christian Street, in the Whitechapel district. The ground floor of the house and the yard at the back were used as a furniture shop and a workshop.

My grandfather died in 1932 when I was two years old so I don't remember him at all. My grandmother died in 1953. By then I was married. In 1941 due to our being bombed out we moved back to a slum flat in Christian Street, just 150 yards away on the other side. For seven years from 1943 to 1950 when she was removed to an old age home I saw her frequently. However, to my great regret, I didn't have one conversation with her.

She spoke no English, but my mother was bilingual and could have translated had I wished. I can only put it down to the folly of youth that there was so little communication between us. I now long to know what her life was like in Gomel; how, with six children, she travelled that long distance over land; what happened when she arrived in London. I know that all my aunts and uncles went to school here.

I feel a huge gap in the history and story of my family and I don't want my children and grandchildren to suffer that gap. So I am writing this story so that they can know the experiences that I encountered in World War II.

Chapter 2 - Leaving Home

In late August 1939 we were told that all children of school age and mothers with younger children and babies were to be evacuated from London. There were great concerns about the likelihood of war and the subsequent bombing that would take place. Evacuation would be organised on the basis of school registration. However, so that siblings would not be separated, young schoolchildren would go with their older sisters and brothers. We had a practice run of this exactly one year earlier when it was feared that war was approaching.

My sister Sue, who was thirteen, was at an all girls' school in Spitalfields. I was nine and at a local primary school so I went away with her. On Friday, September 1st we presented ourselves at central Foundation Girls' School. We had to carry our own cases, not that we had much to pack. My mother

had had to borrow five shillings (25 pence) from a neighbour to buy these cases. Parents were not allowed to accompany their children. We gathered in the school hall. It was a small school of at most two hundred pupils and about fifteen teachers in all. Although the vast majority attended the school I very quickly made friends with laurel, a girl of the same age as myself, who was there with her older sister. We lined up in twos and were marched to Liverpool Street Station which was close by and boarded a train. Carriages in trains were very different to those in use today. There were long corridors all along one side and from these corridors there were doors into the carriages which had long bench seats facing each other and suitable for five on each bench. The train journey was about two hours and we made four stops on route. At one stop a girl asked a railway guard where we were going and he said 'Ely'. None of us had ever heard of it before.

On arrival we formed a line and walked from the station to a local primary school. All around the walls of the school hall were long benches where we were told to sit. We were given stamped postcards and told to write home to our parents to tell them where we were. In the centre of the hall were the many local people who had been requested to take in evacuees by a billeting officer. Gradually children were chosen and went off to their new foster homes. Sue and I were left until almost the last as no-one wanted two sisters. Eventually we were chosen by Mrs Cooper and off we went to what was to become our new home.

Chapter 3 - Our First Billet

I do not remember there being a Mr Cooper but there was a grown-up single daughter so I expect Mrs Cooper was in her late forties or fifties and quite unused to small girls aged nine and thirteen. She lived in a modern three-bedroom house with a front and back garden with a bathroom and indoor toilet neither of which we had ever experienced before. Mrs Cooper, even to my young eye, was very house proud. She had large carpets with rugs over them to protect them. We ate all meals together and we were given the smallest back bedroom to share. On Sunday September 3rd at 11am we sat by the radio and heard the announcement by the then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain that we were at war. At nine years old it really meant nothing to me.

My strongest memories of living in the Cooper household was Friday night bath time. At 6 o'clock, after tea, we went upstairs to have a bath. My sister washed my hair and was told to towel it dry. I could not go to bed with wet hair and we were not allowed downstairs again. I do believe Mrs Cooper was worried that we would wear out the stair carpet if we used it too much. Having lived in a poor part of London up till then I had no experience of gardens and flowers but I do remember quite vividly one of Mrs Cooper's neighbour's front garden. It had a monkey tree in it and was full, at that time of the year, with double dahlias and they attracted earwigs which fascinated me. Sue and I stayed with the Coopers until late December when Mrs Cooper told the billeting officer that she could not have us anymore. She was going to have two soldiers instead. I could not understand how two soldiers would be easier than us but, in an older and wiser age, I realised that billeting soldiers paid more than evacuees. We were then temporarily housed with a new family, the Henson's.

Chapter 4 - Education and Our First Christmas

All the girls on the evacuation group to Ely were pupils of the central Foundation Girls' School (CFGs) except Laurel and myself. Being both only nine years old we could not attend that school so arrangements had to be made for us elsewhere. By coincidence Jewish Free School (JFS) was also evacuated to Ely so, both of us being Jewish, Laurel and I joined that school and had all our lessons there. Boys and girls were educated separately.

During those early days of the war we were sometimes joined by girls who spoke no English. I later came to realise that those were German refugees who had managed to escape Nazi Germany. At no time while I was in Ely did we attend the various primary schools that were established there although later on we did use some of their facilities.

Within a few short weeks of our being away from London, parents organised coach trips to come and visit us. Just before Christmas 1939 Sue and I went to the market square where the coach stopped as Mom was coming to visit us. We looked forward to it with great anticipation. We waited at the square, the coach pulled up but no mother. Instead another of the mothers told us that Mom could not come and gave us each a large brown paper carrier bag packed with toys, games and goodies. We did not know at the time but Mom had broken her leg and was in hospital. We walked back to Henson's and Sue began to cry. I could not understand it and asked her why she was crying when we had all these toys and games. We had been brought up in a Jewish home, attended a largely Jewish school and in a Jewish neighbourhood. We had never celebrated Christmas in any way at all. However, it was quite different at the Henson's. There were two old teenage boys there and, on Christmas Eve, they told us to hang our long socks over the post at the end of the bed. I was woken up during the night hearing someone moving but ignored it. Next morning on examining my sock I found nuts, and orange and some coal in it. It was my first experience of a Christmas tradition. We had a lovely Christmas lunch but the next day we packed our belongings and moved to our next foster home.

Chapter 5 - The Parsons Family

We were now in our next billet, Mrs Parsons and her two daughters Phyllis and Beryl. I believe we got along quite well. Mr Parson was a serving soldier and was away. I do not remember seeing him at all. Every morning at breakfast Mrs Parsons read to Beryl, who was about six, the cartoon strip of Rupert Bear. Every Saturday morning, without fail, we attended a children's synagogue service. This was run by teachers from JFS in a chapel given over for the purpose. I suppose all traces of Christianity were removed at the time. Every Sunday morning I was sent to Sunday school. I know that Sue did not go. At fourteen she was considered too old. The teacher there told her, 'it is a shame that you are Jewish; Rita would have made a lovely little Christian'. It was a very cold winter that year in Ely but I was still wearing little silk socks although my legs were blue. 'Why aren't you wearing your long thick socks', my mother asked me. So I told her that Sue would not let me wear them until my little silk socks were worn out. What a little mother my sister was to me. The weather was, in fact, so cold that the river Ouse, which runs through Ely, froze to such a depth that there was ice skating on it. We went to

watch and went sliding on it ourselves. We had fun making a snowman and having snowball fights. In retrospect I realise that Mrs Parsons was a lovely lady with a sense of humour. Sue and I had two cousins, Phyllis and Marie, both considerably older than us, to whom we had been very close. Phyllis wrote to us regularly while we were away but nothing from Marie. Marie always wrote in mauve ink we joked to Mrs Parsons that if we had a letter from Marie we would put the flag out. One day we came home from school to find a large Union Jack fluttering from the roof. There, waiting for us, was the letter addressed in mauve ink.

Chapter 6 – Return to London

In April 1940 war had not really reached London except for shortages of most goods and rationing. There was no bombing, no air raids. So, along with many other evacuees, Sue and I returned home. We were still living in Mulberry Street at that time. My dad was working away from home all week and only returned at the weekend. He was highly skilled cabinet maker but there was obviously no call for quality furniture so he was employed as a carpenter in Hitchin in Hertfordshire helping to build and furnish army huts.

A school nearby was open and catering for all-age children, boys and girls, in one classroom. I was in top age range for primary school so I was entered and sat in the prelim exam. In those days most London children sat the Junior County exam, very much like the 11-plus which followed later on. The result of this exam put children into three groups. The top band went to a grammar school, middle band went to a central school, where exams at sixteen were possible and the lowest group went to a secondary school where it was possible to leave at fourteen, later raised to fifteen. In order to reduce the number of children sitting the Junior County, an exam called a preliminary was sat to separate those that were not capable of taking the later test. I still remember taking this prelim and telling my mother how easy I had found it. I passed it.

By June and July 1940 bombing of London began. At first it was only the docks area, two miles away, that was the target. But when the German bombers came close to the outskirts of London an air raid siren was sounded. This was very loud and rose and fell in waves so it was easily identifiable. We then took ourselves off to an air raid shelter. The one we chose was close by and called the Tilbury. The Tilbury was a very large warehouse used for storage of goods from the docks. It had seven storeys and between each storey was three feet of iron girders and reinforced concrete. It seemed invincible. It was also completely empty except for a few wooden tea chests. We stayed in this shelter until we heard the all-clear signal. This was similar in volume to the warning sound but was not undulating so it was easily distinguishable. The air raid usually lasted from nightfall until dawn, a matter of six or seven hours in the summer months. So, after a couple of nights of just standing around, I asked my mother to bring a pillow and blanket with us. I made myself a comfortable bed in a tea chest and went to sleep.

During this time bombing began in earnest in the streets around our home. A friend and I used to go out during the day and look for pieces of shrapnel lying around to take as souvenirs. By August 1940 Sue and I along with many other returning evacuees, were sent back to Ely and to safety.

In the introduction I told that two aunts and one uncle had immigrated to the USA. My mother was in continuous communication with one of her sisters so she decided that for our safety we would be sent to Chicago to escape the horrors of the war. We were registered with the Mrs Roosevelt scheme. Our bags were packed and we were ready to go but the ship carrying evacuees before the one we were due to go on was torpedoed in the Atlantic so the scheme was stopped.

Chapter 7 – Separated

When we returned to Ely Sue was found a home with Mr and Mrs Norman and their daughter Bessie.

They could not accommodate me as well so, aged ten and a half I was placed in a large centre, a sort of half-way house until a suitable placement could be found for me. I don't remember how long I was there but during that time I contracted scabies, a very nasty skin infection. My treatment was to soak in a bath with sulphur in it and then stand naked while a medico painted me all over with some sort of noxious liquid. I remember it being a very nasty experience but I recovered and was the, in September sent to my next and final foster home.

The Hitches were a large family. Mr Hitch was a veteran of World War I and always wore his army belt; Mrs Hitch was a most easy going and delightful woman. There were four sons; Roy, twenty-one, was in the army, a military policeman, Joe, seventeen, was a coalman, Alf eleven, was a choirboy at the Ely Cathedral School, then there was George, nine and the baby, Margaret eight months.

The Hitches lived in a three bedroom semi-detached council house in the centre of the town with a small front garden in which they grew flowers and a large garden at the back with a couple of fruit trees, and a large plot for growing vegetables. They also kept chickens. One night we were all kept awake by the squawking of a chicken. The next morning it was found dead. Mrs Hitch cut it open and pronounced it had to be egg bound. Inside were about fifteen eggs in varying stages of development. It was amazing how we all fitted in. Margaret slept in a cot in her parents' bedroom. Joe, Alf and George shared one bedroom and I had the small bedroom to myself.

There was no electricity; the living room was lit by a gas fitting in the ceiling. We took candles to see ourselves up to bed. Except in the very warm weather all the cooking was done on a coal fired grate in the living room with an oven heated by it. Mrs Hitch always managed to cook a delicious roast every Sunday and wonderful cakes. In high summer a gas cooker in the kitchen came into use. There was a crystal set attached to a window sill so we had two BBC radio stations, the Light Programme and the Home Service.

The kitchen at the back of the house was rarely used. There was a large larder where food was stored, a sink in one corner and a built-in stone copper in another. Off this kitchen was bathroom with just a bath and a cold water tap. Hot water was obtained only by lighting a fire in the copper and filling

it with water from the sink. The lavatory was just outside the back door. As usual in the country, the front door was rarely used, usually only for official visitors. All the bicycles stood against it in the hallway. We used the back door all the time.

Chapter 8 – New Activities

In London most of my playtime activities were playground games such as skipping, whip and top and ball games. In the country and especially living in a house with boys it was quite different. I soon learnt to ride and then acquired a bicycle (cost £1). Alf, George and I rode to the fields outside the centre and picked blackberries, searched for mushrooms and went shooting rats with an air gun on the town dump. Buses in Ely only ran on Thursday and Saturday, the market days so a bike was an absolute necessity. I became quite proficient and could ride 'no hands'. I used to visit outlying villages like Witchford, Queen Adelaide, Chettisham and Prickwillow. I remember visiting Hitch relatives in Soham and Littleport, both several miles away and returning with a chicken on one handlebar and a dozen eggs on the other one. I also got hurt by some of my adventures. Once I climbed a tree and fell down off it scraping my upper leg quite badly, but I tied my hanky round it and carried on playing. The scar remained for many years. Once I was attracted to some beautiful red berries growing on a bush. I ate them but was so violently sick and ill afterwards that I lived on only arrowroot for a week.

In the winter months we spent the evenings making models with Meccano and doing large drawings of aerial dogfights. All round Ely in the flat lands were aerodromes. Planes flew overhead constantly so we could recognise and draw them accurately – Spitfires, Hurricanes, Wellingtons, Blenheims Mark 1 and Mark IV as well as Heinkels and Messerschmitz. One of my greatest pleasures was attending one of the three local cinemas. Over the back garden wall was the back door to the Majestic, the 'flea-pit' and sometimes if the cinema back door wasn't too secure we would get in free. However, the Saturday afternoon's children's cinema at the Rex was great. The Rex was quite a smart picture house in the High Street, with prices of two pence, five pence and eight pence. Once I saw the headmistress in the best seats and was awe struck at the thought of being able to afford it. The special Saturday afternoon pictures were one penny admission. Doors opened at 1pm but I always got there at 12 o'clock and spent the next hour pushing and fighting to maintain my place. The cowboy films were always a favourite and also Tarzan of the Apes.

In 1940 there was a restriction on the number of magazines and comics that could be printed. He Hitch boys' favourite was the Wizard. It was delivered every other Tuesday morning. We were not allowed to read at the table so whoever of us got up first got the comic and sat on it until breakfast was over. My favourite character was Rockfist Rogan RAF. Mrs Hitch had an afternoon job as a school cleaner so when we got home in the afternoon we took it turns to set the table for tea. Another job she had was repairing the Union Jack flag which flew over Ely Cathedral on special days. It was enormous. I can only judge it by the size of the living room to be about 15 feet by 8 feet. It was quite astonishing how torn it got and Mrs Hitch had red, white and blue cloth which she used to mend it.

Chapter 9 – A New School

In January 1941 I sat the Junior County exam and later heard I'd passed so in the following September I joined my sister and became a pupil of CFGS. I knew what the uniform would be like. In the summer we wore emerald green poplin dresses with tiny pearl buttons down the front of the bodice, puffed sleeves and a very large beige collar. We also wore straw hats with a red and green band (the school colours). In winter we wore navy blue tunics, beige long sleeve blouses with square necks and a dark green long jumper, which we usually tucked up, with a round neck and a collar with a red stripe on it. There were navy blue blazers with the school badge and velour hats with the transferred hat band. We always had to wear a small brown leather purse with a long strap over one shoulder and held firm by the tunic belt around the waist.

Most of the lessons were held in rooms in Archer House. This was a large commercial building facing Market Square and previously used by a firm of solicitors. Playtime was held in Market Square. Needlecraft was held at Ely High School who had excellent facilities and there I learnt how to use a sewing machine. From the very beginning work was given the utmost importance. Homework was given regularly. All the staff of the school were single females and had gone to Ely with the evacuees. No let-up was given because it was wartime. The school was given the use of a very large garden which was divided up into plots of about twenty feet by twelve feet. This was to be used by four girls. My new best friend, Sheila Shaw and myself along with two other girls had to maintain our plot. We learned how to dig the soil and use a hoe to make rows into which we planted seeds of onions, carrots, radishes and other vegetables. We were so excited about our first venture into horticulture that I'm afraid we sometimes dug and ate some vegetable when they were still quite tiny.

Another venture which was organised for us was to go out pea picking. We four girls who gardened together went to a large field and were given a sack by a local farmer and told to pick peas and fill the sack which paid two shillings a sackful. I'm afraid the taste of newly picked peas was too much of a temptation to resist and it took us all day to fill two sacks which earned us the princely sum of one shilling (5 pence) each. Apart from the aerodrome around Ely there were also prisoner of war camps. Many of the prisoners worked on the land. The German camp was protected by high wire fences and the prisoners, when not working, were kept in their compound. However, there was a much more liberal attitude towards the Italian prisoners of war. They were frequently seen around the town and we often saw them at the cinema or with the local girls, the young Ely men being away in the forces.

Every day I walked back from school with Sheila. I said 'goodbye' at her gate and then said daily prayer. 'When I arrive at 10 Brays Lane, the Hitch house, my Mum and Dad will be waiting to take me back to London'. I realise now that it was the only way I had to articulate how much I missed my family and my old life.

Chapter 10 – Home and Return Visits

Sometimes in the school holidays we'd go to London for a visit. In 1942 during one of these visits I discovered that we'd moved house. A land mine much more powerful than a bomb had landed in the next street. The force of it had blown a large drain pipe through the window into our living room. In the

room was a tall china cabinet full of various items of glassware. Amazingly not one piece was broken but the authorities considered the house unsafe and so my mother found a flat to rent in Christian Street. It was a terrible slum but, for the first time we had our own lavatory and our own front door. On one of these return visits Alf Hitch came with us to see London for the first time. As I mentioned earlier he was a pupil at Ely Cathedral Choir School and had travelled in his most formal uniform – striped trousers, a black cut-away jacket and a mortar board hat. It was most similar to photos of Winston Churchill in his Harrow days. I can't imagine what our cockney neighbours made of him. But mostly my mother came to visit us in Ely. When she did come she sometimes stayed with Sue at the Normans but Mrs Hitch thought it wasn't fair that she should have to divide her limited time between us so she had Mum and Sue to stay. Where she put us all is bewildering but she was so hospitable. One time she had gathered together a large quantity of plums in preparation for bottling. With Sue and I downstairs and Alf and George upstairs at the window we had a plum fight. We spoiled the whole batch but Mrs Hitch just stood there and laughed at it all.

I was always excited and full of anticipation when I was going back to London for a short visit. On one occasion I awoke early in the morning and could hear the bicycles being moved from being the front door. I guessed that I must have been about 7am and Mr Hitch and Joe were going off to work. I got up, got dressed and came downstairs only to find that it was 5am and the men had just returned from their stint of fire watching from the top of the Cathedral. Whenever I did go home, or my mother returned from visiting us, Mrs Hitch packed us up with a suitcase full of fresh vegetables. Vegetables were a rarity in London. People queued for almost everything. My mother was very popular then and neighbours came and begged her, 'Please Mrs Kara, could I have half an onion'.

Chapter 11 – Home Again

By Christmas 1942 London was much quieter. The bombing had stopped and so, along with many other evacuees, I came home for good. Sue stayed in Ely until the following Easter as she wished to finish her Secretarial Course. CFGS in Spital Square in Spitalfields was functioning normally. Most of the teachers had returned and the vast majority of the girls I had been to school with in Ely were back. It seemed that their parents had chosen a school convenient for their London address but had sent them to Ely in 1941.

Calling the registered was amusing. We had to reply, 'Present, Gas Mask, Identity Tag', as we were compelled to carry the last two items with us at all times. We sometimes had Gas Mask drill but, thank fully, only ever wore them as a drill. There were no school dinners at that time and we were not allowed to bring packed lunches. Instead we were escorted to a nearby meal centre. These were government organised restaurants set up all over London where people could go and have a very cheap hot meal. There was no choice of menu but being teenage girls there was a lot on our plates that we didn't like. We were supposed to clear our plates but under the eyes of a watchful teacher we took it in turns to bring a brown paper bag and pass it around on our laps under the table and fill it with unwanted food.

On February 19th, my thirteenth birthday, we had a great surprise. We had a visit from Herz, my aunt in USA's son in law, who was here in London as a soldier with the American forces. My mother, knowing what the situation was like for British troops, made him a food parcel although we had very strict food rationing. She even managed to find a bar of the bitter chocolate which was all we had. Herz was horrified at it and brought us wonderful goodies from the American stores. He once brought a whole box of twenty-four Hershey bars. You can imagine what my friends in school thought of that.

Chapter 12 – Putting on a Show

In the summer of 1943 my mother and father being at work and Sue now at her first job I was left to myself all day. So I used to go and visit my cousin Phyllis, the younger sister of Marie, who always used mauve ink. She lived in the Aldgate area, about fifteen minutes walk away. Phyllis's husband, Mark, was in the 8th Army and was fighting in North Africa. She had a small daughter, Shirley, who was six so Phyllis was home all day. While there I got friendly with two girls who lived nearby, Susan and Irene Yasheim. Phyllis thought it would be a good idea to keep us occupied and to do a good deed we should put on a show. Joining us would be Phyllis's stepsister Nitra who was fifteen and Mark's younger brother, Harold, who was fourteen plus Shirley. So the six of us planned and rehearsed a concert. The stage we used was the bombed out shell that had been the Yasheim's house. The floor, side walls and ceiling were intact but there were no front walls, door or windows. We strung a curtain across the gap and devised a show consisting of songs sketches and comedy routines. Harold made a wonderful Hitler. We put out flyers and collected children from local schools and play centre groups. We did three performances and had audiences of twenty to thirty each time. We charged sixpence to watch and sent the money to the Army Benevolent Fund. I think it gave Phyllis a great deal of pleasure as she felt she was helping her husband. Word of our show got to the ears of a magazine. It was a pictorial magazine similar to the then popular Picture Post, which now is like Hello or OK. A photographer and journalist came to talk to us and take photos. We then got a three page spread in the following issue. I think the photo of the Yasheim sisters singing in the shell of their former house was a winner. After the publication of the article we received a lot of letters and postal orders contributing to the cause. We also received a very large box of stage costumes sent to us by a woman who had been a chorus girl on the West End stage.

In autumn 1943 I was admitted to the London Hospital suffering from acute appendicitis. Every time an air raid warning was sounded the nurses lifted the top layers of the bed and put them underneath the bed frame. Sweets and chocolates were still rationed and in short supply. Phyllis visited me bring with her tins of homemade chocolates which went down well with all the nursing staff.

Chapter 13 – Life in Black-Out London

When I returned to school after my hospitalisation I found Olga, an old primary school friend, now there. We had sat next to each other when we were seven and so we became close friends and for about two years we were inseparable. Nights were still spent in the Tilbury shelter but, by then it was organised. There were separate sections for men and those for women and children. Bunk beds were

laid out in rows and people brought their own bedding and left it there. Toilets, wash basins and electric lights were installed. On some evenings we were entertained by professional singers and comedians. The place was policed by air raid shelter wardens. My father was one of them.

Every evening we would go to the shelter at about 8 o'clock and return home at 5 when I would have another couple of hours of sleep in my own bed. In those days my mother worked as a tailoress in a local clothing factory. Hours were 8am till 6.30pm so I was always home by 4pm it was my responsibility to get the evening meal started so that we could eat by 7 o'clock.

No allowances were made at school for this disruption to our lives. Homework had to be in on time and formal exams took place regularly. Olga and I always walked home with two other girls, Marcelle and Betty. Whilst today's teenagers would buy crisps and sweets on their journey home, we would go into an old delicatessen and buy a large pickled cucumber for sixpence and have it cut into for pieces.

Olga and I joined a local mixed youth club. It opened during the evenings from 7pm till 10pm on Monday to Thursday and on Sunday there was usually a dance to records in the hall. My favourite activities were sporting. I loved table tennis and badminton of which I represented the club in tournaments. Played squash and athletics in the summer.

As we were still in wartime, all windows had to be blacked out with special curtains and shutters when we turned the lights on. Not a chink of light could be shown and if it did a blackout warden would knock at the door. There were no street lights whatsoever so it was necessary for everyone to have a torch. This was quite small and took a number eight battery, approximately the equivalent of a modern 'A' size. Added to this the light had to be muted with the addition of two pieces of brown paper.

Chapter 14 – V1s and V2s

London was in ruins. Everywhere in the East End was bomb damage and rubble. As a family we were lucky as no-one close to us lost their lives. We listened intently to the radio. It was our first contact with the outside world. Music and comedy shows were the main stays of the Light Programme; the Home service had more serious topics.

Then a new threat hit London. The first we knew of it was when newspapers reported a German plane crashing and no pilot could be found. After one or two more of these mysteries we discovered the answer. They were pilotless planes directed towards London. Radar on the south coast detected them as they crossed the English Channel and an air raid warning was sounded. Unlike the earlier war years these raids happened during the day. We went to school as usual as nothing was allowed to interfere with our studies but two ground floor classrooms were adapted for these raids. The windows were completely bricked up. When the warning went we downed our pens and the entire school packed into these two rooms and stayed there until the all-clear was sounded. Then back to our studies. These pilotless planes were called V1s or doodlebugs.

We could hear the buzz of them coming over. If they seemed to be close to overhead and their noise suddenly cut out we knew they were coming down. If you were at home you just took shelter. If you

were in the street you quickly dived into one of the many brick-built shelters constructed at frequent intervals along the street. V1s were rockets. We had no warning when these were coming over.

One afternoon going home from school I was walking through Spitalfields fruit and vegetable market when a stall holder offered me a banana. It was the first consignment to these shores since 1939. I took it home and hung it over my bed as a souvenir until it turned black and had to be thrown away.

In 1944 a new girl arrived at school. Her name was Sybil and she and I very quickly became very best friends. We had a lot of interests in common and stayed very close until she married in 1950 and went to live in Trinidad.

Chapter 15 – War Is Over For Us

It was spring 1945 and I was besotted with the American dance music scene. I hated all the English bands. We had no records or indeed a record player so every night when the rest of the family were asleep I would creep out of bed and listened to the radio tuned down so low that it didn't wake anyone. I always tuned in to AFN American Forces Network so I could hear my favourite bands and, of lucky, Frank Sinatra. I was a huge fan in those days.

One night, on May 8th, I heard the announcement that the Germans had surrendered and that war in Europe was now over. I immediately woke the rest of the family with the wonderful news. We got dressed and caught the night bus to Trafalgar Square which, like now, was the venue for celebrations. We stayed up all night. Euphoria doesn't begin to describe our feelings. Blackout curtains and blinds were thrown away. Torches with number eight batteries and two sheets of brown paper were discarded.

Most factories, schools and entire streets had parties to celebrate. Although the war continued in the Far East, it was over for Londoners. My family never queried how I heard the news first.

Chapter 16 – Post War Events

In 1946 the thirty girls in my class sat their most important examinations, School Certificate. To pass this a credit, equivalent to a present B Grade was needed in at least five subjects including English, Maths or Science, a foreign language, history or geography and one other. Twenty-one girls passed this School Certificate and, of these, twelve, including myself, got the higher grade of Matriculation. All these twenty-one girls had had two years primary education and four years secondary education disrupted by war; by being bombed out and evacuated away from their homes and families.

In 1950 Sybil and I went back to Ely for a weekend to visit old friends. In 1951 I got married and I invited Mrs Hitch and Margaret, who was eleven years old, was a bridesmaid. They slept in my beds as I was on my honeymoon. It was their first visit to London and my mother entertained them.

I didn't keep in touch with the Hitches much after that until 1974 when the school where I was teaching asked me to accompany my class of twelve year olds on a week's course booked at a

Norfolk nature reserve. On the way there we were to stop in Ely to visit the cathedral and Oliver Cromwell's House. I remembered from my 1950 visit that Roy Hitch, having left the army and joined Ely Post Office. I wrote to him care of the PO and was able to arrange to meet him. He told me that both his parents were now dead and also brother Joe. I wrote to Alf still living in the area and Margaret who had moved to Devon.

In 1989 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the evacuation some central Foundation pupils arranged a visit to Ely to remember old times. It was difficult to contact many of the two hundred or more ex-pupils, being female, had married and changed their surnames, many had moved out of London and several had gone to live abroad. Two of my Ely friends had gone abroad, Laurel to Spain and Sheila to South Africa. Nevertheless, about thirty women turned up to make the trip, two coming from as far as Canada and Australia. I arranged to meet Alf Hitch and we spent a most pleasant afternoon talking about old times. He looked, and probably still does, exactly like his mother.

10 Brays Lane was no longer there. The lovely little street with a circle of houses at the end, nicknamed 'The Spoon' had been demolished to make way for a Tesco car park. This is called progress.

Alf, Margaret and I still exchange Christmas greetings. I still have hopes of visiting Margaret in Devon.