

Written by Peggy Cornforth

Life during Wartime

In 1939 there were six members of my family – my mother and father, me, my sister Poppy and my brothers Reg and Ted. My brother Doug had died of diphtheria in 1935 in the Ilford isolation hospital.

My father worked as a guard coming out of Stratford station and we lived in a rented railway house at 226 Ley Street, Ilford. The buildings around the house were dark and the rooms in our house were poky. There were trams running on tracks in the middle of the street outside and on foggy days all you could hear was the bells of those trams.

War was declared on September 1st 1939 which was my fourteenth birthday. This messed up my birthday. I had been promised a two wheeled bike but it was cancelled because of the war.

My father had been a reservist since the 1914-1918 war. He used to go for two weeks of training a year, and he was paid for that, and the money was useful. Every year he came back sunburned and well, so we called it his annual holiday. That summer in 1939 was glorious but there was a feeling of unrest around.

Before the war started we used to dig shelters for people. They had to be six feet under the ground. In our street we made an effort to help widows who did not have husbands to dig the six foot holes needed for the shelters. Ten of us worked on each shelter and we were paid in cups of tea, cream cakes and ice creams. To us it was sheer enjoyment and it was good to think that we were helping other people. When our shelter was delivered, a spare part was included by accident so we used it to build an extra cover over the door. We covered our shelter with dirt and planted nasturtium seeds in the soil. That summer there was a mass of colour on our shelter. As the shelter was six feet below ground, it kept filling with water. My father built a wooden platform so that our bunks were away from the water. He also built a shelf on which he put torches, matches, candles and all our shoes.

A fortnight after my birthday my sister and I were evacuated to Chelmsford. My Aunt Daisy was living with her husband and daughter in a three bedroom house in a cul de sac. My Aunt was interviewed and told that she was eligible to take in two evacuees. She put in for us rather than take in strangers. My Aunt Daisy was sharp spoken and we were frightened of her. When we arrived she told me that she didn't like my father because he was a hypocrite but I didn't understand what she meant by that.

My Aunt Daisy's husband Walter had a good job as a foreman at Hoffmans. He was well paid and they were buying their own house, which to us put them in the land of the rich and respectable. My Aunt took her pinafore off before she opened the door and she made us tie back our long curly hair into a bun. My

uncle Walter didn't speak to us, but he gave us pocket money every week which we used to pay to see films with our cousin Beryl.

Every evening we used to sit at Aunt Daisy's table watching her cut the round loaf crossways. I was so hungry I used to dribble. After dinner we had rice pudding made with water instead of milk, and with jam on top. We spent three months in Chelmsford. I wrote home every week: 'Dear Mum, get us home as soon as you can'.

One Sunday I had a dreadful stomach ache and stayed on the sofa all day, being given peppermint by my Aunt. I went to bed and woke up to find blood all over my pyjama trousers. I was petrified and knew that I would be told off by my Aunt. I didn't know what had happened. I told my sister Poppy and she said 'You've got the girls complaint, a period'. She sent me to see Aunt Daisy's daughter Beryl who was 21. Beryl took some time telling me what had happened and what I had to do. Then she made me promise not to tell Poppy.

Eventually my mother decided to bring us back home because she said she was lonely and finding it difficult to make ends meet. My brother Reg had gone into the Navy, my father was in the Army and Mum had to send a fair amount of the Army pay to Aunt Daisy to pay for our upkeep.

When we arrived home it was Christmastime. I was fourteen and had to look for a job so that I could pay my keep. My father was home. He asked me whether I wanted to go into service or to work in a department shop called Moulton's in the High Street. My father and I went along to the three storey building looking for work for me, and we were interviewed by the manager. The manager wanted to know if I was good and obedient, and when my father said that I was, they took me on to work in the shoe department, starting the following Monday. The pay was 7/6d a week which was half a crown for me and five shillings for my mother. I had to wear a black dress, black stockings and black shoes. My mother cashed in an endowment insurance policy which had been taken out for all the children so that we could pay for new clothes when we started work. I went with my mother to buy the black dress at Moulton's and it had to be made up especially in the children's department because I was so small – normally children's departments did not sell black clothes for young girls. I was also too short to reach the pulley in the store so as customers placed orders I had to stand on a wooden stool to put the order in the pulley so that it could be sent across to the cash desk.

I worked for four happy years at Moulton's and made good friends. I was apprenticed to the different departments for three months at a time. I loved Haberdashery – everything cost three farthings and I used to add up the sales at the end of the day. If the total came to 9s 11 3/4d I used to try to persuade a customer to buy a strip of pins, or shoulder pads, or a pad for if you suffered from underarm sweat, because these all cost a farthing and that would mean that my takings added up to ten shillings. As my commission was 3s in the £ I tried to earn more money if I could.

I didn't like the make-up counter. My boss Mrs Robin (pronounced Row-bin) was blonde and blue eyed and looked like Alice Fay. She treated the travellers (now called sales reps) very badly and looked at them as if they were something the cat had brought in. She made them wait for hours and hours, bowing and scraping for orders. The work was demeaning for these poor men – they were low paid and relied on commission. Mrs Robin had me running round as well – in the morning she used to disappear into an alcove where she had propped up a big mirror; then she used to powder her face with a big powder puff, and then she would brush past me saying 'Clean that up, Peggy'. She sent me to Sainsbury's or to the dry cleaner's in my lunch hour so I had little time for lunch. This went on for months but I didn't say anything for a while, but eventually I plucked up the courage to say that I would not be running any more errands.

In the mean time the war was progressing around us. There were bombs being dropped and we were also frightened of basket incendiaries which used to float like parachutes and drop everywhere, causing fires. We were spending the nights in our shelter which was uncomfortable and airless. I slept in the top bunk and I hated it.

One night a bomb fell on the allotments. In the railway houses we lost all the windows, and all the ceilings upstairs fell down. Luckily we were in the shelter at the time. Following the bombing we moved all the beds downstairs but most nights we slept in the shelter. When my father came home on leave he worked with some railway workers to put some Essex boarding where the ceilings had been. One night after my father and my brother Ted had been working all day, we sat and watched the docks in London blaze because they were all on fire after a bombing raid. The next night we had a family argument because my brother and I asked if we could sleep downstairs in the house for one night. My sister Poppy cried and didn't want to be left alone so we all slept in the shelter. That night a landmine fell in the street and we came out of the shelter to find that our house was no longer there, apart from a couple of walls left standing, when the landmine fell the platform at the bottom of the shelter collapsed and the bunks all tipped sideways. My father ran out and saw our neighbour's son who had fallen from his bedroom into the fire outside what had been our house, so my father was able to save him. My mother came out of the shelter and walked around picking up broken ornaments crying.

In the next few days her eyes became very hollow looking and were surrounded by black shadows and patches. My father explained that our mother had to be sent away, so she was evacuated to our Aunt Daisy's house in Chelmsford, while we stayed living in the shelter and eating at a local hostel. We fed our cat every day, hoping to take it with us when we moved. We lived like that for two weeks while we waited to see whether we were going to be given a requisitioned house. This would be a temporary arrangement until the people returned to their house at the end of the war. We were offered a house in Lockwood Road, Ilford, which I was keen to take because our surname was Lockwood, but our father refused. Instead he went to Hornchurch because he had heard that there was a board next to the bus garage in

Hornchurch which said 'Houses to rent 21/- a week'. My father went there and rented 27 Northdown Road, a house which had been used by fire watchers who had left it in a bit of a mess. We moved there on a Thursday afternoon because the shop Moulton's where I worked was closed and the men from the delivery department lent us their delivery van. On the day we moved we called our cat, who came eventually, and then we buttered its paws and took it to our new home.

At work I was given a travel allowance on top of my salary so that I could travel from Hornchurch to Ilford. I had just started to receive this extra money when a bomb and some incendiaries hit Moulton's and the top floor was lost. We were called in and told that the shop would close for nine months, and when it re-opened only basic wages would be paid. I carried on working, dealing with goods which had been damaged and which were going to be sold in the salvage sale. My job was to wash and hang out to dry items from the women's department, including underwear and sanitary towels. Also, I cleaned shoes covered in white dust left by the firemen's extinguishers, and I dried them using a one bar electric fire. The day of the salvage sale, people left their shelters at five o'clock in the morning and started to queue outside Moulton's. I arrived at quarter to nine. The doors of the shop were opened for ten minutes at a time and inside there was chaos as people walked all over each other trying to get at the goods. I was selling slippers at half a crown each and ended up with a pocket full of money.

I stayed at Moulton's for four years until I was called up at the age of 18 and sent to work at Temple Mills in the marshalling yard. When I arrived the yard master took one look at me and said "This is no place for girls. There's no chair for you to sit on. There's no toilet for you." He phoned the office at Stratford to say that he couldn't take me on, but he replied that there were no male clerks available. They said that there was a war on and that a chair, a tin hat and a gas mask would be sent from Stratford, and that the men could whistle when I used the toilet so that they didn't use it at the same time. They told him that they would have to put up with me.

I worked in the wages office doing the pay-as-you-earn income tax. I was not allowed to change my job until the war was over. By this time the doodle bugs had started. I felt safe sitting in the office listening to the doodle bugs going overhead, but one day then engine of a doodle bug had stopped a few miles before it reached our office. We knew it was travelling towards us so we went to stand under the local bridge. A doodle bug fell on a soap factory just by the train lines. A man from my office threw me down to the ground as hundreds of bars of soap flew through the air towards me. After a while we picked ourselves up and went back to the office – but the ceilings were down and everything was covered in dust and dirt. I tried to talk to my workmates but I had lost my voice with the shock so I was given two weeks off. I think that the frequent bombing raids, the demolished buildings and the digging out of people who lived around Stratford and Leyton had all become too much for me.