

Written by Peter Bell

In August 1939 we left Beckenham in Kent to go on holiday in Sidmouth Devon. Whilst there our father's office in the City was evacuated to Weston Super Mare and our father fetched us in a borrowed car and we went to Weston Super Mare. On Sept. 3rd under strict instruction to return to billet from roller skating on the Front before 11.00 I heard the Declaration of War.

Grown ups were so serious but I thought the extended holiday great! Shortly afterwards I returned to boarding school in Surrey but spent Christmas 1939 back in Weston Super Mare. In early 1940 during the Summer term my Mother visited – a special treat to have lunch in an hotel – and told me that they had had an invitation from my father's cousin Rex Petley in Buenos Aires to send my sister (age 6) and I (age 9) there for the duration of the War. Rex had gone to Argentina in the 20s and was Managing Director of the Telephone Company (UT). He had generously offered to pay the costs of our passage and my Parents had, after much soul searching, decided to accept his offer in view of the war situation (Dunkirk and Invasion Scare) – great I thought a sea voyage and adventure. I only had a vague recollection of Rex and his wife, Olga (an Anglo Argentinian) from their Honeymoon trip to England in the 1930s, but that didn't worry me.

I then remember a gloomy trip to The Blue Star Line Offices in the City to meet the Stewardess who was to look after us on board and various serious looking men. Then it was last minute arrangements (excitement) and on the 1st of July 1940 off we went to Paddington. My Parents, Grandparents came to see off my sister and I to board a Blue Bulbed Train and left at about Midnight for Swansea.

I just said goodbye as though returning to boarding school – I don't think my sister knew what was happening and off we went.

We boarded The Avila Star in Swansea the next day and sailed in the evening. The vessel was still operating a peace time Passenger Service with Stewards and ice cream. I remember crossing the Bay of Biscay in rough weather with nearly everyone being seasick and being in the dining saloon almost alone with Stewards serving me with lots of ice cream.

There were several other children on board, about 6 I think, presumably returning to Parents in Argentina from school in England and we more or less had the run of the ship hardly seeing our Stewardess, except at bedtime.

After a 3 week voyage calling at St. Vincent island and Rio de Janeiro we arrived in Buenos Aires in the evening to be met by Rex and Olga. We got into a Buick Limosine driven by a chauffeur. There were lots of lights on the drive to the apartment. When we arrived we were put to bed by the maid who only spoke Spanish and she used sign language as we did not understand the language. So far it was all very exciting and we hardly missed home.

To digress a little we came from an ordinary suburban background in London and here we were with kind strangers driven by a chauffeur and in an apartment with living-in cook, maid and butler. The apartment was that big – the first thing we had to get used to was being served in the dining room by

the butler. It is difficult to serve oneself from a salver – much easier to slide it on to the plate, which the butler did with a wink.

There was a swimming pool in the garden and I soon discovered that on the first floor were Germans – we were on the second floor – so from time to time we squirted water through their window – very naughty.

Then there were the poses for photos to send back to our Parents after we had been taken shopping for new clothes and a haircut, also Rex and Olga being childless made great efforts to introduce us to friends and family with children of our age to play with.

After that it was time for school. I was taken to Westminster College, an English Prep. School, the first term by limosine as a day boy and thereafter as a boarder. As there was not enough schools for everyone they operated a shift system in the public section and by Law everyone up to 14 had to do half a day of Argentine lessons in Spanish which by now I had somehow learned. Argentine history with the English Invasions, Geography, Maths, Civil Instruction etc. and we poor English schoolchildren then did the other half of English lessons – we thought it terrible to do a whole day instead of half, but there were lots of Argentine children at Westminster as well so their Parents must have wanted them to learn English but I had several fights in the playground over The Falklands Islands. I said they were British they said (The Malvinas) were in the Argentine. We also had to parade every morning by Law to salute the raising of the Flag and sing The Argentine National Anthem – I still know most of it.

Then it was summer holiday time, December to March and Rex had rented a house by the sea near Punta del Este in Uruguay, so Olga, my sister and I, the cook and the butler crossed by ferry to Montevideo – all night trip – and passed the wreck of the Graf Spee, The Battle of which I had seen on the newsreel in England – a special trip from my English school – to boost morale I suppose.

My Parents having expected us to be away only for a few months had not seen us for five years and I was now 15 and my sister 11. Having lived a very different life style than in England and I think we had become so used to Argentina that possibly we did not want to return, except that we did want to see our Parents again. Anyway we did not have any choice as Rex arranged for us to board The Highland Princess (a converted troopship) brining troops home from the Falklands (Force 132) and after another 3 weeks at sea we landed in Liverpool to be met by our Parents almost strangers into drab wartime England with rationing – what a shock.

I supposed reading this necessarily short account one could say what lucky evacuees but who can tell the effects on ones life – would we have been different people had we stayed. Did it change our lives – I suppose it must have for good or bad who knows.

We do know that we loved our Parents (and now understand the difficulties of their destination of their decision to send us away) but we also loved Rex and Olga who were so kind and generous in our extended stay with them.