

Evacuation in The Second World War

Introduction

Within minutes of the Prime Minister, announcing that Great Britain had declared war on Nazi Germany on the 3rd September, 1939 air-raid sirens began to sound all over the country. The entire population of Britain found themselves in the 'front-line'. This was not new.

During the First World War the Germans flew giant airships known as Zeppelins, and dropped bombs on the towns and cities of Britain killing nearly 1,400 civilians. Toward the end of the First World War new German aircraft specially designed to drop bombs - these aircraft were now called 'bombers' - had raided Britain but they could not carry many bombs. This all changed on 27 April, 1937 when modern German bombers of the type seen right supporting General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, appeared in the afternoon sky over the town of Guernica. The air-raid, the first using a large number of aircraft carrying lots of bombs, killed nearly 1700 people and injured another 900. This raid made sure the bombing of cities and attacks on the civilian populations was to be part of any future war. In the late 1930s those nations who could afford to begun to expand their air-forces and made sure bombers were among the aircraft that were built.



By December 1939 Germany had nearly 1,400 bombers. The British Royal Air Force had less than 300. It is little wonder that the British Government was terrified of hundreds of German bombers flying across the English Channel and bombing the cities. The fear of thousands of innocent women and children being killed made the Government decide very quickly after Britain declared war on Germany on September, 1939 to move as many school children, mothers with young children and pregnant women from the cities to areas where they would be safe, or at least safer than staying in the big cities which would surely be an early target for the huge German airforce, or Luftwaffe. Including the 103,000 teachers who were needed to teach all these children nearly 1,500,000 people were evacuated from the cities of Britain in September 1939 - most of them in a single weekend! Many children did not stay for long and soon went home. But when the Germans did start bombing the cities in 1940 a second wave of evacuations began.



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What follows is the true story of one small girl who was evacuated in September 1939 and the experiences she had. There are also short accounts from other children who were moved from their homes and families.



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Source Sheet 1

Source A:

The story of a young girl who was evacuated in 1940 from Chatham to Wales.

I was ten years old when the War started in September 1939. This is my family in the photograph (*Source B*), I am the second from the left. My Mother, my younger sister, she was 5, and older brother who was 14 and me had to leave my father who was a soldier, in Egypt and



Source B: The family at Christmas, 1941

come back to Great Britain. We sailed on a troop ship from Egypt to Marseilles, in the south of France when we then went by train to the English Channel and then by ferry to England where we stayed in Chatham, in Kent. This was the time of what was called 'The Phoney War'. Some people thought Germany would not attack us as they had done to Poland and even make peace with Adolf Hitler. We had also missed the first period of evacuations.

This all changed in May 1940 when Germany attacked France. In Great Britain people began to worry about the safety of children in those towns and cities in the south of England which were in real danger of being bombed by the Germans, like they had done in Poland, and so the government decided to move the children from these towns and cities to safety. This was called 'The Evacuation'. My mother, like all the parents was told that moving her children to safety was the best thing to



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Source C: Evacuees being examined by a nurse

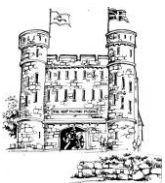
do. So in June 1940 my Mother, who was very upset, took my bother, sister and me to the station and put us on a train that would take us to Wales. We had no idea how far away this was. Some children even went as far away as Canada to be safer!

We arrived in Wales where we were put into a large hall where other people came and read the information on the labels we had tied to our coats. This label had our names and information people who were to look after us should know. My mother had been honest and she had done as she was told. You did that in those dangerous days.

My little sister used to have tummy upsets, nothing serious and remember she was only 5. This was written on her label. That first day we were all split up. I was taken by a kind family who were members of the Salvation Army and my brother was taken by a strict family. My sister went to a children's home. No one would take her due to her tummy problems. Nobody wanted her. We were all confused by being split up. Our father was in Egypt, our mother was in Chatham and now we were all with strangers



Source D: An evacuee with his luggage



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and in different places in what was to us a strange country. I cried myself to sleep that night and for many more nights to come.

My mother came to visit us whenever she could. One time she visited the people who my brother was staying with for tea. As well as tea there were cakes to eat. Well at least that was what my brother thought they were for. But the daughter of the family knew otherwise. My mother was upset when she heard the daughter telling her parents that my brother had eaten a cake. He was not allowed cakes.

My sister was very unhappy and my mother was distressed knowing we were all split up. But she, like many other mothers, felt she was doing the 'right thing' and at least we were safe even if I had to eat bull's hearts every Sunday!

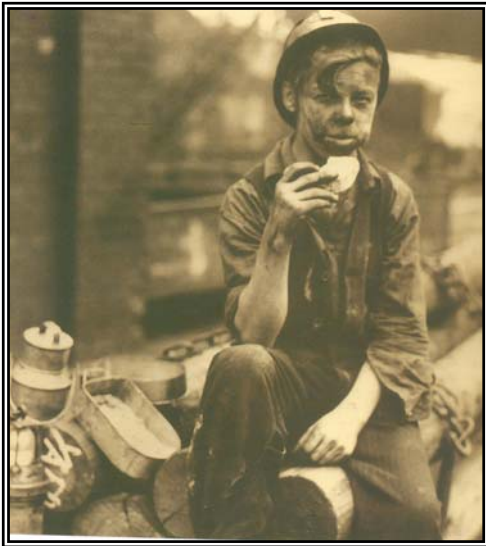
The Germans began bombing London and many other cities and towns of Britain in September 1940. That was some three months after we had left Chatham to go to Wales. Chatham at that time had a large Royal Navy dockyard with many sailors, marines and soldiers. It was very easy for German bombers to drop their bombs on Chatham and fly the short distance back to France. Even with this danger my mother, still very upset at us all being split up decided in March 1941 we had been kept apart for long enough. The news from North Africa where my father was fighting had not been very good and there was the real danger that he may be hurt or worse so my mother wanted her children with her. She came to Wales and brought us home together. We were very happy. Although we were all together as a family and in constant danger of being bombed, which meant that we often missed school because we were going into the air-raid shelters either most of the



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night so we had little or no sleep or during the day during school. This affected my sister and me. My disrupted education is something I still regret. My brother, then 15 and old enough for work, (many 14 and 15 year olds were in full time

Source E: A fourteen year old miner



employment) was better off as he began an engineering apprenticeship in Chatham dockyard. He would stay a marine engineer for most of his working life.

We spent the rest of the war in Chatham. My mother was a part-time air-raid warden, often working through the night and was a Red Cross nurse. My father came home safely in 1945, six years after we had left him. He had changed a great deal from before the war. So even for our family, who did not have any close relatives killed,

the War had left its mark and I will never ever forget my experience as an evacuee.'



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Source Sheet 2: Experiences of other Evacuees

Source F:

A former schoolgirl evacuee talking about her experiences in late 1939;

'I couldn't understand why we had been sent. Nothing had happened, because there did not seem to be any war. It seemed premature. Mother was at home - everything was perfect at home.'

Source G:

A young girl from London evacuated to Berkshire in late 1939:

'I really did fear invasion - because we knew they (the Germans) had marched into Poland, just like that. A polish refugee was in our billet, and she used to get into hysterics about what she had gone through. We had to calm her down. I felt 'God, if that happens here, what would it be like?'



Source J: Young school girls on an evacuation

Source H:

A school girl evacuated from Hull to Scarborough - on the Yorkshire coast:

'I thought it was a great joke. You get into these school stories and you think "Oh it will just like boarding school". We were evacuated to a hotel which overlooked the Italian Gardens in Scarborough. There were two girls to a bed and we were six to a bedroom. It was a very cold winter and everything froze up and there was no hot water in the place. One of my first memories is of the first hot meal we had at the hotel. For dessert we had bread and butter pudding, but we didn't like the lettuce and the meat that was floating about in it. We went to school in the morning and did nothing in the afternoon. It was a just a beautiful summer, we just went swimming and things like that.'



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Source K:

A boy evacuated from central London to Berkshire during the first months of the war:

'We were in a very grand house - I cannot remember seeing all of the rooms. I think we were told to stay in one sort of area or the garden - these are the only parts I remember other than sitting down for meals. There we were, tucked away and being looked after. We were away from anything that was going to happen. But as the weeks passed, nothing happened. Perhaps the people with whom we were staying were thinking "We have taken these people in for nothing." It was a very real feeling.

After about three weeks our parents visited us - they came by bus. The lady looking after us took us into Reading, and we waited by the cinema. Mum and Dad arrived and took us around the town buying us sweets and making a fuss - then after a couple of hours they had to get back onto the bus and go home to London. I cannot remember my Mum and Dad coming back to the house. I don't know why but they never did come and see where we were billeted - which is strange when you think about it. Dad had to go back to work, so we were just collected again and they went back to London. But we said we weren't happy then.

The week after Mum had gone back, I sent a card. On the bottom of it I had written "Dear Mum, we want to come home." Within a week they were down and took us back with them. The whole experience had lasted only about seven weeks. Mum and Dad must have seen a difference in us, but I do not know why. We had been well fed and we were being looked after - but it didn't work. I think that whatever was going to happen to her and Dad included us as well. The people who we left did not argue - I think perhaps they were glad we had gone.'

Source L:

It was not just the British who were worried about their children. This shows German children being evacuated from Berlin in October 1940. They seem a great deal happier than most of the British children.



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