

Wartime memories of the Suburb

IVAN BERG

It was 1943 and there was a war on. I was seven years old and as far as I knew there had always been a war on. I had always had to wear my gas mask in its cardboard box over my shoulder, and carry my 'Under Sixteen' Identity Card with my name and address. My mother was in hospital, my father was in the Royal Artillery in Iraq.

So in the late summer of 1943 I was taken to stay with my father's sister Anne, her husband Joe, and cousins Paula, Mavis and Nina in their large detached house in Meadoway, Hampstead Garden Suburb.

I was enrolled in the Suburb School and remember walking the length of Willifield Way to and from school every day. The Suburb was bombed in 1940 during the 'Blitz' and although I walked past the 'bomb sites', most particularly Fellowship House which had been completely destroyed by a land mine that fell on Willifield Green, I accepted the sights as unremarkable. As unremarkable as the brick and concrete air raid shelters in the playground which we trotted into, class by class, carrying our gas masks every time the ascending and descending wail of an air raid siren sounded.

The shelters were dark and damp, with brick walls and a flat concrete roof, the only ventilation being the open entrance. We sat

on benches along the walls, gas masks on laps, mostly silent, at least to start with, until our teacher asked us in turn to recite a favourite poem or sing a song to pass the time until we heard the continuous tone of the all clear siren.

Cousin Nina was my age and the fun and games included the usual Doctors and Nurses, Hide and Seek in the huge overgrown garden and 'Parachutists', a game I invented that led to my downfall.

The parachute game employed umbrellas in lieu of parachutes. I attempted to persuade Nina that it would be perfectly safe to jump out of a top floor window with an open umbrella. The umbrella would work just like a parachute. Nina said that she would only jump out of the window if I did it first.

Someone grabbed me just as I was about to jump out of the open window with umbrella unfurled. I don't remember who it was, but my Uncle and Aunt were rather upset and shortly afterwards I was collected by my mother's brother, my uncle the Reverend Joseph Halpern, who lived close by with his family in Temple Fortune.

Uncle Joe took me on a bus to Bloomsbury and thence into the Jewish Board of Deputies building in Bloomsbury Square. A rather nice woman, probably a secretary, brought me a glass of milk and some bread and jam and asked me if I would like to play with a typewriter. When I finished the

bread and jam she pinned a label on me, gave me my gas mask and took me and my small suitcase on a bus to a railway station, probably Victoria, put me on a train and said that 'some nice people' would meet me at Farnham station – where I assume she told the Guard to put me off.

I was sent to Rowledge House in Farnham in Surrey. A 'Kindertransport' hostel, set up by the Central British Fund for German Jewry in the months leading up to World War II. How uncle Joe managed to get me in there as a child refugee I will never know. I remember trying not to cry during the day and then feeling unloved and unwanted, crying myself to sleep. I don't know how long I was there, probably not more than a few months during the winter of 1943 and spring of 1944, but the experience was both traumatic and formative; the feelings of abandonment lasted for years.

My father managed to get a compassionate posting from Iraq to a Royal Artillery barracks on Hampstead Heath, found out where I was and rescued me. My mother was out of hospital and as she had nowhere to live she was staying with her brother Joe and family. So for me it was out of the frying pan into the fire of living with the uncle who had so dispassionately dispatched me to a hostel for child refugees.



I was also welcomed back to the Suburb School. Spring 1944 was the start of Hitler's campaign of Vergeltungswaffen-1, (Revenge Weapon 1 or V1), flying bombs aimed at London which all us kids knew as Doodlebugs or Buzzbombs. I particularly remember hanging about outside the playground shelter watching a V1 flying low over the Suburb, waiting for the throbbing pulse-jet engine to stop to see where it fell, but I was

yanked inside by my teacher so I never saw it drop, just heard the boom of the explosion.

We spent a lot of time in the air raid shelters that summer. Lights were installed, blackboards appeared and primitive lessons were attempted. But it worked. I learned to love poetry, I learned to love stories, best of all I learned to love to read. Strange to tell I really enjoyed it.

"For me they were always small packages of delight"

MARIE-CHRISTINE O'CALLAGHAN

On balmy summer evenings I delight in watching the wayward flittering of bats around my garden. Bats have had a really bad press and are often seen as dark creatures of the night, not least because of their association with vampires. I blame Bram Stoker who, in his book Dracula, has his hero, Jonathan Harker, write: "Between me and the moonlight flitted a great bat, coming and going in great, whirling circles," forever linking bats to Dracula. Vampire bats do exist, they live in Central and South America, and though they will, occasionally, feed on humans, they prefer other mammals or even birds, and, while there are over 1,300 species of bats, only 3 species are vampires.

Bats can be found practically everywhere, with the exception of very hot deserts and polar regions. They vary widely in size and shape. The smallest, the Kitti's hog-nosed bat, weighs less than a penny, the largest, the Flying Fox, has a wingspan of 1.5m. (5 feet) and can weigh up to 1.4 kg (3 lb); by the way, this one is a fruit eating bat.

To go back to the bats in the garden, they are called Pipistrelle and are common throughout Britain. They hibernate in winter (sleeping through Halloween!) emerging around April and, being very hungry, will each proceed to eat up to 3,000 insects in a single night. Bats are the only mammal that can truly fly which is just as well as they catch most of the insects in mid-air. They find them using echolocation, a biological

sonar, which allows bats (and dolphins) to emit calls that travel through the environment until it hits an object and echoes back to the sender letting it know where the object is. Bats can make 160 calls per second so they are unlikely to fly into your hair and you are unlikely to hear them as they use ultrasound frequencies.

Bats are truly amazing creatures that are actually good for the environment and for us. They eat so many insects they reduce the amount of pesticides farmers need to use. They have been called the gardeners of the rainforest because they pollinate plants and help spread their seeds. Without bats, bananas, avocados, mangoes, nuts, figs, vanilla and cacao would have a problem surviving. If you like tequila you should be grateful



Lyle's flying fox bat (Pteropus vampyrus)

to bats as they are the main pollinator of agaves. Remember the vampire bats? Recent studies have shown their venom contains an anticoagulant toxin (aptly named Draculin) which helps stroke victims.

Perhaps, we should join the Chinese who associate bats with good fortune. In Mandarin, the word 'bat' is a homonym of good luck; consequently, bats fly joyously across fabrics, tapestries, jewellery and porcelain.

Watching bats fly at night should indeed inspire delight.

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