

A Visit to Germany

Working in London was a very broadening experience after my sheltered years in West Ealing. I made lots of wonderful new friends, including a nice German girl named Hildegard. She had come to England to work in a household and learn English. A lot of girls from Europe did that in those days.

When Hildegard went back to her home in Germany, we kept up a steady correspondence. She was eager to show me her country, and encouraged me to come and visit. So in May of 1938, I made plans to spend two weeks in Ludwigsburg with her family: Hildegard, her mother, father and sister, Ilse.

My colleagues at Myer Emporium thought it was quite a daring thing, to go over to Germany all alone. I had studied German a little bit, but really knew very little of the language. And I would have to change trains several times to get to the southern part of Germany where Hildegard lived. The war had not yet begun, and we didn't have any real political reason to fear Germany. But traveling alone was not as common for young women as it is today.

My mother had raised me to be daring. Nothing ventured, nothing gained — that was her attitude, and with her support, I went into the trip with total confidence. Thinking back on it now, it does seem a bit bold. Of course there were no cell phones, and very few other phones for that matter. Parents just had to hope that their traveling children arrived safely and were clever enough to work through the myriad challenges that face any world traveler.

One morning while I was staying at Hildegard's home, I woke up to some lovely singing. I opened up my bedroom window, and down below was a contingent of young men marching down the street, bare-chested with shovels over their shoulders. They were members of the Arbeitsdienst, the compulsory work crews who provided the labor for civic and agricultural construction in those years before the war. They



Betty wearing a dirndl she made from fabric she bought on her trip to Germany.

lived outdoors and marched from one job to the next, singing as they went, to inspire the German people with their strength and solidarity.

I met quite a few of those handsome German boys during the time I spent with Hildegard. One night she took me to a Sportsman's Club dance. I had made a long dress of very pretty fabric, and because I was the only English girl, everybody wanted to dance with me. I also met a nice young man at the grocery store who wanted to practice his English and learn about my country. We sat on a bench in the park and made a fairly comic attempt to talk to each other. At the very same time as we were forging international relations, Hitler was preparing to invade Poland.

I had never been very politically aware, but even for a naïve girl like me, it was obvious that Germany was preparing for war. Hitler had taken over Austria just before I left on my trip, and I remember meeting an Austrian girl on the train who said she didn't know what she was going to find when she got home. As I traveled through the country, Hitler's followers were a tangible presence. They would come on board the train and instead of using the greeting *Gruss Gott* (praise God) like the old fashioned Germans, they would say *Heil Hitler*. Other people responded by raising their right arms and saying *Heil Hitler*. Not everyone on the train did it, because at that point it wasn't yet required. That came later.

Before coming to England, Hildegard had been a member of the Hitler Youth. I think by the time I came to visit, though, she was already quite disillusioned with the Nazi Party. Still, it was easy to see how a person could get caught up in all the enthusiasm. Hitler came on the scene when Germany was under a terrible economic strain. The Germans were suffering from the aftermath of World War I, and I suppose he really did look like a savior. Had he just stopped at a certain point I think it would have just been fine. But he went overboard, and the German people followed him.

The War Hits Home

Within a year after I returned from Germany, war was declared. Hitler invaded Poland the first week of September, 1939, and England, which had a pact with Poland, came to its aid. Very soon it seemed the only males in England were kids and old men. Every able-bodied man was involved in military service in some capacity.

Within my mother's family, several men were impacted. My mother's brothers, Jack and Jim, were too old to be conscripted, but they were both in industries that turned immediately to wartime production. My cousin Peter got a deferral from service because of his terrible eyesight, but my cousin Sid went into the Air Force. He had been married just the day before war was declared, and it was heartbreaking to see him sent off to the Far East. He was stationed in Sumatra, where he served as a photographer. He survived the war, escaping the island just as the Japanese invaded, and returned to England with beautiful pictures of the Sumatran people.

At some point during the war, my father was called on by the government to do a big plumbing job in northern Wales, and my mother went with him. The government could conscript you and put you wherever they needed you, and you didn't have too much to say about it. As I see it, that's what got things done! Sometimes you need that kind of forced participation to get through tough times.

From a civilian standpoint, there were several different phases of the war over its six-year span. Sometimes the action seemed very close to home. Then there would be a lull for a time, and then the bombing would start in again, in some new and more terrifying way. For a time there were dogfights right over London. Later they were aiming to destroy the heavy manufacturing facilities in the Midlands.

We got to be very good at spotting planes. The Office of War Information circulated booklets that showed us the silhouettes of both the friendly and the enemy planes, and we could say, "Oh, that's a Lancaster," or "That's a Spitfire." We always recognized the German

planes because their engines had an entirely different sound from the English planes.

Ruislip was only a few miles out from the center of London, so we always knew when the city was being bombed. You could see the glare in the sky and hear the explosions. On a still day, we could even hear the guns in France. Where we lived, it was only 21 miles across the channel. When things were going badly, we could hear the bombardments over on the continent. It was a little nerve-wracking.

For a period, they were dropping incendiary bombs, which were just heavy enough to pierce a roof. Those bombs would lodge in the attic of a building and set it on fire. During that phase, everybody had to become fire wardens. We were issued tin helmets and instructions on how to use a stirrup-pump to get water where it was needed. Everyone was assigned to a team responsible for a number of houses. Quite often we could get those fires out before they did a lot of damage. Sometimes a fire never even broke through to the top story; it would stay in the attic and the house would survive with minor damage. Other times we were less successful.

Later on we had the V-1 buzz bombs, which were an early form of missile with a small engine on the back. They were launched from the French or Dutch coast, and you could see them going across the sky. They sounded just like motorcycles, and when the sound cut out you knew they were about to fall. That wasn't so bad because you got some warning, but soon they started sending the V-2 rockets over. Those were long-range missiles and you didn't hear them coming. It was just sssssh and then a huge crater.

In the early part of the war when I was still working in London, there were air fights right over the city. It sounds crazy, but in good weather, we liked to go up onto the office roof to eat our lunches and watch the dogfights. You couldn't really see the planes, but you'd see the vapor trails, and occasionally see one of the planes go down in flames. We never knew if it was German or English.

The bombing came quite close to our home — in fact some bombs hit on the next street over. Before and during the war, the government



The Girl Guides were active participants in war preparations on the home front.

distributed millions of easy-to-build air-raid shelters, called Anderson shelters, to householders throughout England. They were made of curved pieces of corrugated iron. You had to bury them four feet deep, and then put the soil you removed on top of the roof. Unfortunately they had no ventilation, and there was a lot of trouble with condensation. My father opted not to build one, but our neighbors next door put one in, and when the bombing was very bad, they always invited us to join them. It was so unpleasant, though, we generally stayed in our own home. Our concession was that we would come downstairs and if the bombs were very close, we would sit underneath our kitchen table, which was very sturdy, to protect ourselves from any falling debris.

My Uncle Jack installed an indoor air-raid shelter called a Morrison shelter. It was made of steel and looked like a table with wire mesh sides and floor. It took up a large area, about six by four feet, and they used it as a dining room table. None of these shelters would have

saved you from a direct hit, but if an upper story collapsed or a wall blew in, the shelters might save you from the debris.

Some English towns went relatively unscathed, while others suffered terrible destruction. One of those was Exeter, where my future husband was stationed. It was a lovely ancient town, and they destroyed buildings that were absolutely irreplaceable. Fortunately, the cathedral survived, with all of its stained glass windows boarded up so they wouldn't be damaged.

BBC radio did its best to keep us abreast of the war's progress, but rumors traveled faster than the news. There were stories of German fighter planes chasing people up their garden paths with machine guns. For a while we heard there were German parachutists landing around airports. Since we were right near Northolt Aerodrome, we felt especially vulnerable. I loved to sleep with my window open, but I began placing my field hockey stick by my bed, so that if a German parachutist happened to put his head through my bedroom window I could bonk him with it! We didn't have a gun at our home, but I was ready to defend myself in any way I could.

On the other hand, having visited Germany and known Hildegard, I could never feel any hatred toward the German people. I'd met too many nice people, and I felt they'd been sold a bill of goods by their leaders. We were fairly progressive in our family, and cursed Hitler, rather than the German people. We were not the kind to hate anybody. I can't say that perspective was shared by many other English people, though, especially not those who grew up during World War I. My Auntie Mabel was one of those with very deeply ingrained prejudices, and it's hard to change that.

Wartime Sacrifices

Rationing was introduced very early in England, in January of 1940, two years before it was imposed in America. Living with rationing was quite a source of anxiety for my mother, who had always been a very good cook. It wasn't that we didn't have enough to eat, and I don't remember ever feeling hungry. But we couldn't get much variety, and she worried about our nutrition. The meat allowances were very small, and some of the products we were used to simply weren't available. I'm talking about silly things you never would have thought about when you could get them, like ketchup. Whenever the local women heard that there was something like that at the store, they would line up to get it, just to have something that would make the meager food choices a little more interesting.

Sugar was one of the first things rationed, and soon afterwards, tea. That was a real hardship for the English, because you know, we lived on tea! We had to stretch our supplies, drinking it weaker than we would have liked. Every once in a while we could get a little jam. I remember once soon after I met Dick, he came to dinner at our home. He wasn't used to rationing, and put a big scoop of jam on his bread, and I remember how my mother's eyes went big! We were just so used to being careful — much more so than people in America, where there was always so much of everything. In England, you were always taught not to take too much, to think about the next person. "Leave enough for somebody else," that's how we were raised. Whereas I find here, it's, "Get all you can!" Even at church doings, I'm surprised at how people load up their plates, never thinking that somebody else might like some. It's just a different way of thinking.

During those war years, there were very few cars on the streets. There wasn't the petrol to run them, or the rubber to fix the tires. Our family never owned a car as long as I lived in England. We did have nice bikes, and those were our main way of getting around. My mother, my dad — everybody rode a bicycle.

We never had a telephone in our home either. Later, when I came to America, I was amazed at the prevalence of telephones and the way Americans used them so freely. My mother-in-law spent a lot of time just visiting on the telephone. That shocked me, having grown up with the idea that the telephone was for serious matters. You got your business done and then you rang off.

The most significant sacrifice, of course, was of our country's young men. I lost so many friends in the war. I remember a boy named Jack who was a window dresser for a big London store called Selfridges. He and I used to ride the train together into the city. When the war began, he volunteered to become an RAF bomber pilot. Sometime later when I was in Gloucestershire, I got a letter from my mother, saying he was killed over Germany. I had a steady stream of those letters, telling me so-and-so was killed, so-and-so is missing. Each time, I'd go in the barn and have a good cry.

You had to be pretty brainy to get into the Royal Air Force, and a lot of my friends went in for the challenge. I had some friends who were in the Army as well, but it seems the Air Force was deadlier. There was a great deal of bombing going on over Germany, and many planes were lost. The bombers carried a large crew --gunners and navigators in addition to pilots — and when one of those went down, many boys were lost.



*The first Women's Land Army assignment in Norfolk.
Midge is the girl in the middle, and Betty is on the right.*

The Country Life

Because there were so few civilian men during the war, England suffered from a tremendous shortage of farm help. At harvest time, with the fruit rotting in the fields for lack of labor, the government put out a call for women to do their part. I had always been a city girl, but the idea of working in the country intrigued me. So in the summer of 1940, my friend Midge and I approached our boss at Myer's to request a one-month leave to work in the Women's Land Army.

Our boss was a Scotsman, very concerned about expenses, and we had to explain the finances of the arrangement. Two weeks of our month off would be our normal vacation, and two weeks would be leave without pay. We would be paid for our labor on the farm, but had to return quite a bit of that as compensation for our room and board. In the end, he agreed to let us go and make this contribution to the war effort.

We were sent to the estate of Lady Petrie in Norfolk, where we were to pick cherries, gooseberries, and other truck-farm produce. It was a very large estate, but the only men remaining there were the foreman and a man who had some disabilities. We joined about a dozen other girls, some from the country but many from London like ourselves, who had come to save the crop.

At the beginning of the war, when the government was sending thousands of children out of London to escape the bombing, Lady Petrie's house had served to house some of the evacuees. So she was pretty well set up for a large influx of temporary workers. We ate in the coachmen's quarters, where a young girl from the village cooked meals for us. We slept in the big house, in large bedrooms with cots lined up along the walls.

I loved working out in the open air, and the month went by very quickly. Soon I was back at Myer Emporium. But by that time, single women were being conscripted. Many of my friends were volunteering for one thing or another, rather than wait for the government



A recruiting poster for the Women's Land Army.

to place them. One of my best friends went into the Naval Reserve, the Wrens. As a stenographer, I knew that if I were conscripted, I'd probably be put behind a desk. That month in Norfolk had given me a taste for country life, so I decided to join the Women's Land Army on a longer commission.

My boss wasn't crazy about letting me go, but he had no choice, since it was war service. Some of the women had to be retained in the office because they were considered essential to getting goods shipped to Australia. But my job was

non-essential, and I was released to be a Women's Land Army volunteer in 1941.

I had a choice of two or three jobs, and I picked the one that sounded the most diverse. I would be doing general farm work at a small place in the Cotswolds, a beautiful region in southwestern England. Folly Farm was owned by the Simmons family, Victor and Edna. I would be their only helper, replacing a boy who had been conscripted into the army.

Mr. Simmons was not able to meet me at the train station when I arrived, so he asked someone from the neighboring village to pick me up in his car. I stepped off the train in my brand new uniform and was greeted by a young man in a rumpled suit and a felt hat — the kind we called a trilby. He looked exactly like Mortimer Snerd, one of Edgar Bergen's ventriloquist dummies, a country bumpkin with very prominent teeth. "Are you for the Simmons farm?" he asked me in

an accent I could scarcely understand. "I've been sent to fetch you."

It was quite an experience for me to live in that part of the country. The people have a terrific accent, and half the time when Victor Simmons would tell me to do something, I'd have to take a guess and do what I thought I'd heard. He was born in Somerset, where an S is pronounced like a Z. "Zummerzet." He'd say to his little girl, Sheila, "You come see oi," meaning, "You come see me." It's amazing how different the accents can be from one part of England to another.



Betty in her Women's Land Army uniform.

I loved the farm, but it was very hard work. In wartime, England had an extra hour of daylight saving's time, so we could make hay until very late at night. We didn't have machines to cut and bale the hay, as you would nowadays. We did all the mowing, raking, pitching and stacking by hand.

The Simmons family had a milking herd of about 24 cows, and Victor, Edna and I would milk the herd between us. I also had to do my share of clearing the manure out of the sheds. Toward the end of my stay, Victor managed to get a DeLaval milking machine. We had no electricity on the farm, so the machine was run by some kind of gas engine. And you still had to go behind the milking machine to strip the cows afterwards. Still, it was much easier than milking every cow by hand.

When I first arrived, the Simmonses didn't have a tractor, so I used to have to harness up a pair of huge horses to pull the machinery for every job we did. This team was terribly ill-matched, and so tall I had to throw the harness over and then get up on a stool to get them harnessed up. I never did plowing with them — Mr. Simmons did that. But I did the harrowing afterwards, using the disk to break up the soil. To fertilize the field, we used a little two-wheeled tip-cart full of manure. Mr. Simmons would drive that along, stopping every so often to drop a pile of manure, and I came behind with a fork to spread it.

After a long week of work, I always got at least part of the weekend off. Often I'd spend Saturdays with my friend Joyce, who lived in the village. She was also serving in the Women's Land Army, but she managed to live at home while she worked on a big estate doing truck farming. She and I would go into the nearby town of Stroud, where there was a nice tea shop with a bakery down below. We really thought we were the cat's meow, wearing our uniforms around town! There was a little movie house there, and sometimes we'd go see a show after we had our tea.

I enjoyed the farm life, but I think what finally got to me were the long hours. We were up early in the morning, and we worked till ten or eleven o'clock at night. My health started to fail, and my parents urged me to come home. After about a year and a half, I left the farm. But I always stayed in close contact with the Simmons family. Victor and Edna's two children, Sheila and Robert, were babies when I lived with them, and I continue to exchange Christmas cards with them, as I have for more than 60 years.