

May 19, 1945

PICTURE
POST



THE START OF VE-DAY

**HULTON'S
NATIONAL
WEEKLY**

53110412

In this issue :

VICTORY SPECIAL 4^D

MAY 19, 1945

Vol. 27. No. 7

This is an extract from David Wilson's family story.
Oma and Opa are his parents.
Robert is David's twin brother and Maggie and Anne his sisters.

WAR TIME 1941 - 1945

Oma and Opa did not talk much about the war. When they recalled 69 memories they were usually about later, happier times. Opa, however, when in his 80's, did say he owed Hitler a debt of gratitude, since the war brought vacancies in the Civil Service and Opa was able to join the Home Office for a settled career, which he enjoyed and was right for him.

For Oma, whatever the outcome, there must have been a deep sadness and sense of loss, though the family was fortunate that no-one was killed on either side. Opa's brother, Martin, rather shocked the Quakers by joining up and served as a sergeant in the Eighth Army in North Africa and then in Italy. He refused to accept a commission and greatly enjoyed his role as personally responsible to his colonel for arranging sports and physical fitness, including competitions, in the sunny south of Italy.

Ernst, Oma's younger brother, served with Rommel in North Africa and Ernst Dittman (sister Eva's husband) served on the Russian front and suffered the most.

The most important family event of these years was Anne's arrival. Anne Elizabeth Wilson was born on 2nd March 1943 in a nursing home in Finchley and Oma and the baby were there for about a week (normal practice in those days, though it was especially important for Oma since she was quite poorly with a heavy chest cold). David and Robert were sent to stay with family friends, the Warrens, and Opa looked after a rather bereft and lonely Maggie.

Anne was a beautiful and peaceful baby from the start and all doted on her. Her birth gave rise to an enduring family legend. The almond trees were in flower and subsequent Springs were judged early or late depending on whether the blossom was out on Anne's birthday. Our neighbour, Mrs Buchan (Ooee - because that's what she called across to us) always reminded us.

Our early memories are of Oma coming into the bedroom to close black-out curtains when the sirens sounded. Curtains which, in their folds and patterns, sometimes brought nightmares.

In the "Doodlebug" times (mid 1944 into 1945) we had a Morrison shelter erected in the sitting room. It was placed to the right of the fireplace, on the window wall and covered part of the window. The Morrison shelter was a double decker, especially for large families. (Herbert Morrison was the Home Secretary in the coalition war cabinet and the shelter was named after him). Later the shelter was dismantled and placed in the garden behind the garage and, for many years, was used as the coal bunker.

The Buckwitz family were German Jews, driven out of Berlin by the Nazis and were our neighbours in the other part of the semi - No 67. (The Buchans were at 71). Two brothers, Hans an artist, and Wolfgang a musician, lived with their mother and sister. Hans painted swirling clouds and angels in bright reds, orange and yellow on the top (ceiling) metal sheet, and when David, Robert and Anne went to bed in the top section they fell asleep guarded by bright angels, painted by German refugees. Maggie slept in the lower "bunk", joined by Oma when she turned in. Opa declined "all this fuss" and went calmly upstairs to his own bed each night for a good sleep.

"Doodlebugs" were V1 rockets (Vergeltungswaffe, reprisal weapon) and some 6,700 were spotted over Britain (mostly London) between June and September 1944. The RAF or anti aircraft fire destroyed over 3,500. In London 25,000 houses were destroyed and the danger meant another substantial wave of evacuation of children into the countryside. We do not recall any pressure for evacuation for the Wilson family.

A row of houses in Ossulton Way were destroyed. A "Doodlebug" seemed to drone over 69's back garden every afternoon at 4.00 pm and the local wits' view was that, such was German punctuality, you could set your watch by it. The danger was when the rocket ran out of fuel and descended and you couldn't hear the drone any longer.

V2 rockets were larger, silent and more sinister but the allied armies were advancing to capture the launch sites or the allied air forces bombed them, and the threat subsided.

Earlier we sometimes sat in the garage under additional protection, if there was a raid and the siren went. Another family story is of Robert and David adding to their defences with upturned empty potties on their heads.

Earlier, too, a stray bomb hit nos 63 and 65 and they were virtually destroyed, and 69 had to have a steel girder placed above the dining room bay window to make it structurally safe. We do not, however, remember our parents talking of any casualties so perhaps the houses were empty or it all happened before we moved to 69 Brookland Rise. We do remember the fun of playing among the ruins, before the houses were rebuilt.

We were also once taken up to Hampstead Heath to see the barrage balloons flying (a deterrent to low flying aircraft) like huge, grey, floating elephants and the anti aircraft guns surrounded by sandbags.

VE Day (Victory in Europe, 8th May 1945) brought the famous Picture Post cover of the Wilson family, except Opa who was at work, and Maggie who was at school. We are perched on a step ladder, hanging out Union Jacks from the front porch. King George VI and Winston Churchill, waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace, are relegated to the back cover. Kurt Hutton, an outstanding photographer for Picture Post, must have been asked to find a typical British family celebrating victory at home. The Huttons were neighbours and very good friends who lived a few doors away in Brookland Rise. We always enjoyed the irony that the "typical mum" on the front cover was of German origin. Anne was at the bottom of the steps, looking up and sadly does not get into the picture. This famous picture was recently projected onto the front of Buckingham Palace during the ceremony to commemorate the 60th anniversary.

Our own memories of the VE day celebrations are of being put to bed in the late afternoon so as not to be too tired to enjoy them. Oma later woke us with the treat of a quarter of a Mars Bar each. (Sweet rationing did not end until April 1949 and even then, there was such a demand that it had to be further extended.) Then we all went down to the open ground between the Mutton Brook and the bus stop at the bottom of Brookland Rise.

There a large crowd of local residents gathered cheering and hugging. There was a huge bonfire with an effigy of Hitler on top, people carried flaming torches and sang and danced. It was exciting but the best bit was the slice of Mars Bar and being allowed to stay up very late.

The burden on Oma must have been huge. She had the challenge of two countries she loved fighting each other, lack of news and contact with her relatives and the task of bringing up four young children in wartime. At least, Opa's health improved from late 1941 onwards, he had a settled job, a daily routine and sufficient income and he was not away fighting.

The view now is that we were all much healthier than now, with a restricted but nourishing diet and plenty of exercise. It must have been difficult, however, to plan menus with variety and interest. Robert was declared vegetarian (untrue), since five ration books could provide enough meat for all of us, but extra cheese was very welcome. We remember powdered eggs, dried bananas, semolina and tapioca (frogs' spawn) and that for adults things like proper coffee were always in short supply.

We did get clothes parcels from Australia. As part of the war effort Australian women knitted clothes, not just for the troops, but for families in Britain. John Inall's mother talked of women's groups "knitting for the war". We have three customs declaration forms for children's clothing sent by J. T. Scott of 150, Falcon Street, North Sydney. The jumpers that David and Robert are wearing in the VE Day Picture Post photograph were always known as the boys' "Australian jumpers".

We must have had a few favourite toys, dolls, teddy bears etc but farm animals, train sets, bikes and games came later. We did have paper, pencils for drawing (every scrap to be used carefully) and we loved books from early on. We played together, had friends and, whenever possible, spent time outdoors in the garden.

When Grahame joined us in the Summer of 1946 Oma's "log book" for him welcomes him into "a very happy family" but we must have squabbled and fought and long Winter rainy days must have been very trying. Oma had a good shout, could be free with an open palmed slap on our legs and laid down quite strict rules. We and our friends were greatly amused, later on, when a notice appeared on the inside of the dining room ("playroom") door saying "Don't say shut up. It's rude". We may have been amused but we obeyed it, or thought we were very clever by whispering it.

Their entertainment or relaxation was to read and to listen to the radio. They both smoked and our abiding memories of comfort and security, if we ever came down into the sitting room after a "bad dream", were of cigarette smoke and a picture of both of them in their own armchairs reading or with the "wireless" on. Oma also always had mending to do and clothes to knit and there was a basket of socks by her chair or old jumpers to unpick to provide the wool for new ones. They enjoyed Tommy Handley's programme ITMA (It's That Man Again) with the catch phrase "Can I do you now, Sir?" and, later on, programmes such as "Round the Horn" and "Take it from here" with the famous comedian Jimmy Edwards the Glum family. In TV days they loved "The Two Ronnies". They took the paper "The News Chronicle" and listened to news bulletins but that would hardly be relaxation.

During the later war years we were seriously ill with Whooping Cough but worse was Scarlet Fever. Opa and Maggie escaped. David, Robert and Anne should have been sent to hospital and isolated but Oma refused to let the family be split up, so we were quarantined at home; no visitors, no going to school, or indeed anywhere. Kind neighbours took shopping lists and money from the garage and returned food and necessities to the garage. Afterwards the house was fumigated. It was a dark, lonely, painful time; only a little better for Maggie who had to spend most of her time in the garden, reliant on her imagination.