

"A tragic situation exists precisely when virtue does not triumph but when it is still felt that man is nobler than forces which destroy him" George Orwell "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool". Shooting an elephant, 1950

TWENTYFOUR

BRITAIN FINDS ITS SOUL GOOD-BYE TO FARMING JEAN AND I MOVE TO
LONDON SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 1939

Incomprehensible as it was for most people that Britain was at war again they adjusted quickly. The malaise which I described to Mother in my letter a month earlier was blown away. Things changed almost over night. The engine drivers called off their threatened strike immediately. The tension which had built up over weeks and months was released. The war was now a national purpose, relegating everything else into the background. Gas masks were distributed and women and children were evacuated from big towns. Churchill was appointed to the Admiralty and Eden returned to the Cabinet and was feted as a hero. (Churchill was not appointed Prime Minister until May 1940.) Blackout was enforced, even on the farm, and we took down the windsock on the field where our squire landed his plane lest it might be mistaken by the Luftwaffe for an airfield, a legitimate bombing target.

These were exceedingly difficult times for Jean and me. Of course we were happy to be in England, but our parents and Anni had been unable to escape in time. Not only are wars horrible but I saw little hope for our family if anti-semitic laws were enforced in Slovakia. If Hitler were to win the war, they would perish. If the Allies were to win, which was the more likely outcome, they would almost certainly perish too. Yet we were still very hopeful that something would happen to preserve them.

How could I help in the war effort? Should I stay on the farm? Food production was certainly a war priority. The farm was also relatively safe from bombing attacks. Or, should I join the forces? I had received my recruitment papers from the Czechoslovak Embassy in London on 6th March, but this was a mere formality as the Embassy now had no power of enforcement. Nine days

later, on March 15th, Hitler had occupied Czechoslovakia and the Embassy no longer represented anybody. Only later, when Czechoslovakia formed a Government in exile, did it revert to being an Embassy again. I continued on good terms with it and had my passport re-validated to February 1940 and later several times again. After the war I still travelled on my Czechoslovak passport until I acquired British citizenship.

I could not join the British forces as a foreigner. Later Britain formed the pioneer corps which refugees could join. Later in May 1942 when the Czechoslovak forces had been created in the UK, I volunteered for them, but was rejected.

I had an alternative and that was to emigrate further. Many refugees were being accepted by Australia and other overseas countries. I registered with the Australian High Commissioner; my registration number in Canberra was 39/6440, according to a letter of 3rd September (?) 1939. But I couldn't leave Europe while Anni and our parents were still in Czechoslovakia and I let the Australian registration number lapse.

The war also impinged on Jean's work. When war broke out the entire hospital staff was evacuated to St. Mary's hospital, Sidcup and Jean went with them. As there were no air-raids Jean and the staff moved back to St. Alfege's again where Jean's training continued and she passed her first preliminary exam.

- - -

Now life took a different and unexpected turn for me.

One of the "townee" refugees working on the farm had been studying law in Vienna. This was of little use to him and he tried to begin some technical studies. He hoped to enrol at the Brighton Technical College and went there for an interview but was rejected. "Why don't you try?" he suggested. I did, in June 1939. The Principal had expressed his doubts as to whether the school would suit me. I first thought this was merely a polite way of brushing me off, but not a bit of it. He suggested that with my qualifications I should enrol in a University and promised to do what he could. Soon after he wrote and said that he had been in touch with the Worthing Refugee Committee who were contacting the Chemical Engineering faculty of University College, London. I had no further news for months and had almost forgotten the matter. Summer was changing into autumn, drizzle, mists and cold nights were back again and my cows were giving less milk. Then a letter came from the college offering me a free place. The International Student Service arranged for my living costs which amounted to 23/ 6 (£ 1.175 face value) a week. (Amongst the patrons of the ISS were William Temple, Archbishop of York; Professor H.A.L. Fisher, the Historian and

Jan 6 1940

Stath Warren

Cliddesden

Basingstoke.

18 Gordon St
W.C.I.

Dear Matty,

I am very pleased to hear that you are going to be able to resume your studies again & hope that they may eventually lead to something more in keeping with your abilities.

I did not feel that things were as I would have wished for you or the farm, yet did not know what to do to alter it.

I shall look forward to finding an opportunity to meet you in London sometime.

One day I hope conditions will again arise & there will be such a demand for the services of everyone, that you need never again have to worry about your future.

I wish to thank you for your help & also for many pleasant & interesting conversations.

Yours sincerely,

R. Paterson.

Jan 15 1940

To whom it may Concern

Mr H Schurtz has been in my employment for the last eleven months & I have always found him a very hard worker, honest steady & sober & very willing at all times. & he is very useful at all farm work during the time he have been with me eleven months he have been working with the Cows which are milk with machines & are all run with the milky Pales he's a first class hand with the milking machines & is very quiet & clean in the milking in a few words he have been a good all round man for me

Signed T. G. Collis
Farm Bailiff

123. Mr. Collis's letter

H.G. Wells, the writer; the treasurer was Professor Ernest Barker, whom I met later, and who lived in Bishop's Avenue, Highgate.)

I had almost lost a term as this offer came towards the end of December.

- - -

Mr. Paterson was sorry to lose me. He and I got to know each other quite well during the 11 months I worked on his farm. I was several times invited to Hatch Warren and met his (second?) wife. A brother of his was bailiff on another of his farms. He was totally different in character from Rex, being rather dreamy and impractical and got himself frequently into trouble. Once he drove me in his little car along a narrow lane with characteristic Hampshire high banks. Somehow he managed to topple the car over; it came to rest on one of the banks. I fell heavily on him and scrambled out through the door window which was practically above my head. He followed me out and we managed to upright the car and drove off as if nothing had happened.

Paterson wanted me to stay and become a bailiff on one of his farms with a promise of advance, a house and a car. I rejected the offer with considerable sadness. One of the reasons was that I thought I would never have the capital to start my own farm and I didn't want to be a bailiff for ever. Also, I knew that Mother wanted me to go back to University. Paterson wrote me a very nice letter (see exhibit 122) thanking me for my services. Collis too wrote one in rather curious English. (See exhibit 123).

For years after I read about Rex Paterson in the press; he invented many farm implements and improved animal husbandry. He received prizes from farm organisations. We kept in touch for years, and I visited him a few times, on the last occasion with Joan. He died some years ago. His son took over Houghton Down Farm, which came on the market in the autumn of 1984.

- - -

I arrived in London shortly before Christmas and found lodgings at 18 Gordon Street in Bloomsbury which was almost next door to the Chemical Engineering school. The guest house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Harris. I shared a room with Jenó Rees who had been in London for a little while and worked in a pickle factory in Whitechapel. We each paid 11/- (55p face value) per week for the shared room. We had a gas ring for a kettle or frying pan and a gas fire and had to feed coins into a gas meter. That added 1/- to 2/- to our weekly living costs. This left barely 55 new pennies per week for food and entertainment. We lived largely on marmite, bread, margarine and tea. Restaurant meals were controlled. There were two price categories: 2/6 (12½ p) and 5/- (25p) per

meal but I could not afford either. Fortunately I had saved money from the farm and still had most of my portion of the money I brought with me. University College was evacuated except for the Ramsay Chemical Engineering department which remained in London as it would have been impossible to move because of the large heavy chemical equipment. The department was called after Sir William Ramsay, a Scotsman, who had discovered a whole family of "noble gases" argon, xenon, krypton and neon. He had received the Nobel price in 1904 and from 1887 to 1913 was Professor of Chemistry at University College. He died in 1916 at the age of 64. Because of its name our department tie is adorned with ram's heads.

As the main college building was closed we didn't use the main Gower Street entrance but a back door in Gordon Street, just a few yards away from my lodgings. On my first visit Christmas had already started and I couldn't see anybody anywhere. I walked up a broad staircase, my steps echoing in the empty hall. A man in a grey laboratory coat stood at the top of a ladder mending a fuse. I asked in my best English for Professor H.E. Watson, Head of Department. He turned his head round slowly and looking down at me said "I am Watson", He knew from my accent who I was. He came down and took me to his office and we settled all the details. We saw very little of him as he had been seconded to the Admiralty for war work. Professor M.B. Donald was in charge of the department.

I have no recollection at all what I did at Christmas; it is just possible that I was at SMH which in the meantime had moved to 103, Gower Street just about 3 minutes walk from where I lived.