

Memories of a Child living in Coventry during World War 2

By

Sylvia Ireland (formerly Sykes)

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TEL: (024) 76 73 883 1

Poem written on theme of PEACE

COVENTRY KID

As a "Coventry Kid" so long ago
I knelt each night to pray
That peace would come to my dear town
Peace seemed so far away.

As each night we nursed our fears
Deep inside shelters suppressing our tears
Bombs that were falling
Caused damage appalling
"Oh ! noise from guns, please cease!"
"Lord God, please send us peace."

How I remember that November dawn
Ne'er since have I ever felt so forlorn
My city just rubble and smoking ruins
People were weeping and tending their wounds
Brave wardens and firemen so tired and worn
How I prayed for peace on that winter morn.

Three spires still standing amid all the strife
Encouraged us all to get on with our life.
I still remember that time in May
When hearts rejoiced on VE day

The peace that I'd prayed for
That had seemed so far away
Our dear Lord, had granted to us on that day
When I remember the dead of the City
That men still make war
It seems such a pity

By Sylvia L.A. Ireland

Memories of a child living in Coventry during World War 2

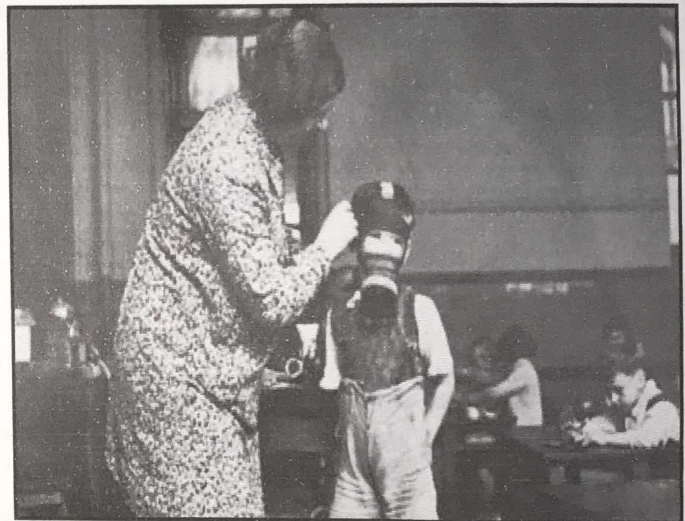
During the outbreak of World War 2, I was a little girl of six living in Cheylesmore, Coventry.

My first memory was a hasty dumping of sandbags in all the streets, to use in case of incendiary (fire) bombs falling, to put out fires.

After the announcement on the wireless on 3rd September, 1939, by Mr. Chamberlaine (the Prime Minister) that war had broken out, people panicked and if they could, left the town for the countryside. I can remember my Dad taking my Mum and I, to live with some friends on a farm at Fenny Drayton, near Nuneaton. After about a week, when no air raids had materialised, we returned home and so did most of the other townsfolk. My Dad, who was a builder, built us an underground air raid shelter in the back garden with steps down and an emergency trap door, lots of less fortunate people had to make do with a metal contraption called an Anderson shelter.



Anderson Shelter



Childs Gas Mask

Some people made do with the 'cubby hole' under the stairs or even a stout dining table for a shelter. Large square brick, reinforced with steel, public shelters were built in streets all over Coventry area. In London, people used to go down the Underground during a raid. All schools had a large air raid shelter built for the pupils to use. We were issued with gas masks which looked hideous. They had a panel at the front to see through and a strap to keep them on and a filter at the bottom for breathing. Children had to take them everywhere with them in case of a gas attack which actually never happened. The school bell used to ring and we had to practice filing quickly into the shelter and putting our gas masks on many times.

For a time there were no air raids and suddenly, one night, the sirens wailed out for the first time for real. We were all very afraid and rushed down into our garden shelter in our nightclothes with coats over the top. Some neighbours begged to come in and we all sat round on the two crowded wooden benches with a newborn baby in a wicker clothes basket in the centre of us. We heard the German planes coming (the engines had a distinctive sound) then we heard our soldiers firing the big guns stationed on the outskirts of Coventry. After that we heard the

British fighter planes, mainly Spitfires and Hurricanes, trying to shoot down the German planes then worst of all, a horrible loud whistling noise as the German planes dropped their bombs. We all sat there holding our breath in fear and saying our prayers. We then heard very loud explosions as the bombs hit targets on the ground, then we all thanked God that our shelter hadn't been hit.

All round the City, large silver barrage balloons floated in the sky to try and stop enemy air craft flying low to attack. They looked like huge grey elephants.

These air raids got worse and more frequent, in fact, instead of going to my bed at night-time, Mum would put me to sleep on a bunk bed in the shelter, ready for when the sirens sounded most nights. This was after one night, when bombs, which destroyed a whole street nearby, were dropped before we were warned by the sirens, my Dad in panic, to save me. rushed me down into the shelter and banged and cut my head on a wall. The next door neighbour was blown by the bomb blast down the shelter steps and was knocked unconscious. Eventually, with a sigh of relief, we would hear the 'All Clear' siren and would go back into our home to find our windows broken and plaster hanging from the ceiling. We had to have criss cross tape across our windows to try and prevent breakage and flying glass, also blackout curtains at every window. No lights were allowed to show. We have no street lamps and car lights were dimmed low so the German planes couldn't see specific targets easily. We had air raid Wardens checking all these things and shouting at people who had a' chink of light showing. These wardens also put out any small fires from incendiary bombs with the sand bags.

All the fit young men between 18 and 40 years were forced to go and fight as soldiers, airmen or sailors. Older or unfit men became members of the homegard (trained to fight in case the country was invaded by the enemy) or like my Dad, trained to be an auxiliary fireman or to act as wardens. They had to do these duties at night and many still had to go to work as usual the next day. Fit ladies had to do war work, either in one of the forces or in munition factories. Many went as land girls doing mens jobs on farms. Older ladies filled in for men fighting, in shops, offices or on the buses. We children still had to attend school even if we had been up all night in air raid shelters.

My school at Cheylesmore was bombed so badly, we had to be taught in groups in the front rooms of ordinary houses until it could be rebuilt. The bombing became so bad that lots of children had to be evacuated into the country to stay with strangers. It was mostly arranged by schools. Some children were even sent away on their own to America. Many children missed their Mums and Dads and families terribly and cried a lot from home sickness. When I was nearly eight, I was evacuated on a farm between Wolvey and Withybrook with a newly married couple who owned Ashhurst Farm. I missed my Mum and Dad terribly at first. I couldn't start the village school straight away because they had no room. I learnt to feed chickens, milk cows, drive a muck cart and help with hay making at harvest. I learnt to ride cart horses bare back, was tossed and injured by a cow in the cowshed and lost control of the reins of a muck cart, then the horse bolted and it nearly overturned. We had to pump our water from a large well, in which was stored the butter and use a wooden seated bucket to toilet.

People were rationed for most foods and had ration books. I can remember a pig being killed illegally in a wash house which was a horrible experience for me to witness. Some people used to buy food on the 'black market' and buy ration books off poor people with large families. We had to eat dried eggs, dried

bananas and fruit and saccharine and never saw an orange. We had very few sweets to eat as they were rationed. We had to eat a lot of rabbit as they were easier to obtain. Hence the popular war time song 'Run, Rabbit, Run'.

I started the village school which consisted of only 2 rooms. It was very crowded 5 - 10 year olds in one room and 11 - 14 year olds in the other. Mr. Beck, the headmaster, was very strict and used the cane a lot for the slightest thing especially on the boys. I was too scared to say I hadn't been taught real writing so hastily joined my printing together so never received any tuition for this. Hence my terrible writing! I remember a Jewish girl of about 13 called Ruth crying all the time as she had been sent from Germany by her parents. Obviously they had been exterminated in the gas chambers over there.

Sometimes to get some respite from the air raids in Coventry my Mum and Dad used to come in cars with friends and sleep in the cars parked under the open barn roof at the farm. If Mum was on her own she would be allowed into the farm house. One night a German plane was shot down in flames. We could hear the engines screaming towards the farm house. The men watching outside shouted TAKE COVER. It's going to hit the roof. My Mum shoved me under a low settee but was too fat to get under herself. Someone shouted to get down the cellar. We all dashed in panic and all fell over the coal scuttle in our haste to get down the cellar which was flooded with at least a foot of water. We all sang songs to keep ourselves calm and the plane just missed the farmhouse and crashed 3 fields away. The German pilot had jumped out with a parachute. The men captured him and next day all the school children watched him marched through the Wolvey village in custody.

My Dad, as an auxiliary fireman had to remain in Coventry to fight fires at night and do his own job. On the night of the Coventry Blitz, 14th November, 1940, we sat up in the farm house, in fear, seeing the terrible glow of fires hanging over Coventry. We thought Dad would be killed but he turned up in the morning. His face was ashen, he looked 10 years older and his hair was grey. He wept "Come and see our City". We got in the farmers car and we had to walk from near the outskirts. As a child, I will never forget the scenes of destruction and devastation of Coventry and smoking buildings as we walked, where we could, in the town centre on that morning of 15th November, 1940. During the night, Dad - Bernard Sykes had rescued and was surrounded by screaming women in Raglan Street. He had had to go on fighting fires so in desperation he pushed them into the metal Gents urinal that stood in the middle of Raglan Street for protection. I believe the same urinal is in a museum now. We laughed afterwards when we realised it had a glass roof.



Broadgate (Left) and Coventry Cathedral (Right) in 1940

I was home for a couple of days holiday and unfortunately the April Coventry Blitz 1941 took place. We were in the air raid shelter when suddenly a landmine dropped nearby and demolished several houses which were in the street opposite to our shelter. I thought we were going to die as the underground shelter moved sideways at an angle of 45% and back again. It felt like an earthquake. We were unharmed but several people were killed and injured.

People turned every bit of garden they could into vegetable allotments to help feed the nation as food ships could rarely get to England because of raids at sea by enemy planes, mines, torpedoes and submarines lurking under the sea. We had clothing coupons. Very plain skimpy clothes were worn. Turbans and headscarves were fashionable. If you were lucky enough to obtain a discarded parachute ladies would make underwear or even a wedding dress out of them. Loads of families in the city kept chickens in their gardens for eggs and bred cockerels for Christmas, including our family. I had some big rabbits which we had to kill and eat which used to upset me. I grew lettuce and sold them for a halfpenny each for pocket money. Children used to go potato picking and had to collect rosehips off the hedgerows to make rosehip syrup to provide vitamin C. We also had to go blackberrying a lot. We played simple games like ludo, snakes and ladders, monopoly and lexicon. Outside we played with skipping ropes, whips and tops, hop scotch and at shops, making mud pies and the boys used to play rolling old tyres down the road. We had no television only books to read from the library and the wireless on which we listened to a show by Tommy Handley called "That Man Again", which everyone liked and laughed about. We used to collect shrapnel from the bombs and pieces of shot down airplanes to keep as souvenirs. We used to sing a lot round the piano for entertainment. Gradually the bombing ceased although London still had flying bombs to contend with known as V1 and V2's. As a child I prayed and longed for Peace more than anything else. I never thought I would ever have it but at last in 1945 came victory. Firstly we celebrated VE night (May 1945) and then VJ night (August 1945). There were parties in every street, long tables laden with jellies and blancmanges made with dried milk for the children and dancing to the wireless by adults in the middle of the road. Bands which had formed playing patriotic music, marched playing joyously through Coventry. I was nearly 13 when peace came.

I hope my Grandchildren never have a childhood like I experienced.

SYLVIA IRELAND (formerly SYKES)

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