

Joyce Luck (1927-2022)

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Joyce Luck recollections

Recorded for Lambeth Archives and later reproduced in a book about WWII

The start of the war

In 1939, I was in Scotland on holiday with my parents' friends and I got the 11 o'clock train from Edinburgh on Sunday 3rd September. It was at 11 o'clock that day the war was declared. The train left half an hour early, had it left later I would have spent the rest of the war in Scotland. As I was on my own and I was 12 years old the guard came along to the compartment and said that he would not be responsible for me on my own. He told me to get off the train in Midlothian and go out in the fields because there was an aircraft over the train and he thought it was a German bomber; this was about 11:15. Fortunately, a woman in the compartment said: 'Definitely this child is not getting off the train; I will look after her until we get to London'. It was the first night of the blackout and my parents had been at King's Cross for four hours asking every train driver if they had a small girl on the train – nobody had seen me – and the train got in four hours late too. The first night of a black out in London, can you imagine what my parents were like when I arrived?

Evacuated to Windsor

I was taken to a very nice bungalow just outside Windsor – sunken rose garden, garage. The teacher left me in the car and went in to ask if they could take me. She came back in tears and said: 'They'll take you as long as you're not Jewish'. She had actually told the lady 'You know we are fighting a war against this sort of thing.' I was there just over a year; not allowed to bring my parents to the house – we knew every tea shop in Windsor, dragging from one to the other at weekends! She rather thought she was a cut above everyone else, her husband was an actor.

My second billet was with a lovely elderly couple and one night there was a raid, the only one they had on Windsor; and we had bombs fore and aft of my billet. My landlady had pushed me under the table, which was a Morrison shelter, and she went up the stairs to see how her daughter Margaret was (she was in bed with the flu), and she was caught on the stairs by the blast, and she lost both legs. I was under the table and the house more or less collapsed. The ARP [Air Raid Precautions] men turned up and asked if there was anyone else, and I said my landlady was going up to see her daughter, so they sent me to check on her. There was Margaret in bed, streaming with flu, the back of the house had gone and it was pouring with rain. The Queen visited the school the next day and came round to see the damage. She took my hand and said I was a really brave little girl.

My last billet was a normal small terrace house – no bathroom of course. The landlady had a daughter of my age, a little baby boy and five of us girls there. She was paid 12 shillings and sixpence [about £25 in 2023] for each of us – a lot of money in those days. We hadn't got a bed between us, we slept on the floor and I was there for nearly 9 months. We used to fight to do the washing up, so we could eat the crumbs off the bread board. We were literally starving. I even used to steal the baby's National Milk; I always used to make his bottle. The baby only got a suspicion of it. I was so hungry.

She was a nasty piece of work; each week she would have a favourite and take you to the cinema and pump you as to what everyone was saying about her. We complained at school, and the teacher did come down; and that day we had boiled eggs and bread and butter for tea, which we had not had all the time before; we never had any of our rations. The husband was a soldier billeted in Windsor barracks. We had one bath a week: in a tin bath in front of the fire; and every Friday night, he came back from the barracks and sat in the armchair to watch us naked – five of us girls had our bath in that tin bath – never occurred to us at the time.

My parents used to come down by train from Clapham Junction. When you kissed them goodbye and waved them away you didn't know literally if you were going to see them alive again. At that age it was heart-breaking and eventually my father said: 'That's it. I can't stand her sad face any more. She's coming home and we'll all die together.' So he contacted one or two of the other fathers of the five of us and all of them came down one weekend and took us home. There was no bedding – it had been lost. My mother couldn't believe how thin we all were.

Working for General de Gaulle

One day, halfway through the year, Monsieur Dupais, who was the tutor asked me to stay behind and said: 'What are you going to do when you finish the course?' I said: 'I don't know, but I would like to go into journalism.' He said it would be better if I worked for a friend of his. So when I got home, I told my parents and my father said: 'You're not working for any Frenchman.' My mother said: 'Don't make a quick decision, find out who it is.' So when I went back the next day, Monsieur Dupais said: 'I am sorry they feel like that. I'll give you a book that he's written.' And so, of course, I came home the next night with the book written by Charles de Gaulle. I always remember the Cross of Lorraine it had on the front cover. My father said: 'If it's him it's alright.'

So Monsieur Dupais wrote me a letter of introduction to Madame Vieux Renard (Old Fox) that being her nom de plume. I had an interview at Carlton House Terrace with this very distinguished lady and had to sign the Official Secrets Act. I was still 16!

I started work at Forces Francaise Libres (Contre Espionage) in a house behind Selfridges in Portman Square. We had a small typing pool and I was the only English person. The woman who supervised us came from Transylvania and it started my great love of Gothic horror. There was just one toilet on the ground floor used by everyone including General de Gaulle. I would see him nearly every day and he was often behind me at the queue for the toilet, which prompted a great friend in France in later years to introduce me to people as 'Ca c'est mon amie Joyce qui avait fait pi-pi avec General de Gaulle.' He was a miserable looking man I must say.

I had a whale of a time when I was there. We worked on selected day shifts and when it was quiet sometimes we would go off to Speakers Corner in Hyde Park. The invasion had started on 6th June 1944 and somebody would come tearing across and say: 'Quick we've got some work to be done.' It was fascinating work. France had been liberated and the men who belonged to the Maquis (the underground movement) had been collating information about the women, mainly those who had been sleeping with the Gestapo or the Wehrmacht and in their pillow-talk had been giving the Germans information about the men in the resistance. There were either 'Collaboratrice' or 'Indicatrice' – women who collaborated and those who gave them information.

The men of the Maquis had no method of reproducing the information they had collated so, once the invasion had started, they were able to come to England in their tiny sail boats, and they would come to London by train. They didn't necessarily come to Portman Square: they would go somewhere else and the hand written information would get to Portman Square and we would type all this information with the peoples' names and addresses and then we ran it off on 'jellies'. We had a tray with a sort of jelly on it and we would put the typed original down and they came out a sort of waxy mauve colour. We could pull off hundreds of copies. Then they went back on the boats with all these piles of information and distributed it round everywhere, and the women were apprehended; either their heads were shaved or they were shot.

So this went on until Paris was liberated. It was decided to move the office back to France, but the British government stepped in because conditions were so bad in Paris, and they refused to allow any British subjects to go over until things had been sorted out. For the ones who didn't go, four of us and a supervisor, we had a party in the Maison de France in Cavendish Square, and I remember that we linked hands and we stretched from one side of Oxford Street to the other, and walked to Marble Arch, then turned round, and all returned singing La Marseillaise.

*Transcription of an interview with **Joyce Luck** for Lambeth Archives,
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