

Going away from Hitler

As a young child I went to live in Scotland to get away from Adolph Hitler. We were living in London just before World War Two in North London where my Grandfather Hoffman lived. My mother Freda said her father was born in Austria, of a Jewish family and he had studied and qualified at Leipzig University in Germany.

I am not sure what Grandfather Hoffmann qualified in, but later he became an engineer and worked with the first motorcars. He is reported to have helped develop Hoffmann ball bearings, which went into the rims of the wheels of cars. The steel ball bearings were embedded in thick oil or grease to help the easy movement of the wheels. However- my brother David, said his research did not confirm that finding – so is it yet another myth about the Craddock and Hoffman family?

He settled in England with his family before World War One started. Mother said that had a dog called Fritz, who came with them. When World War One started the children were told make sure that nobody called their dog Fritz, as English people did not like German names. So Fritz took another name – and the dog never recovered his psychological balance after being renamed.

When I think of mother, I think of music. She could sing and had had some training. She played the piano and said she had a scholarship for classical piano training, which she never took up as her mother died of cancer. My mother was the oldest child and just on eighteen so my mother had to look after the family. There were other young children in family – Lulu, her sister and Roland, who around three years old.

I have memories of her in the lounge arranging flowers, putting them in a vase on the piano and singing Musetta's Waltz Song from La Boheme. We always had a piano at home. Mother would then sit down at the piano, start the song again and play and sing and play and sing. From La Boheme she would move to Viennese operetta, in particular Franz Lehar who composed The Merry Widow. Vilja – a song about a young woman, was among her favourites. It soon became mine too. She sang it many

times over many years. It became a motif in my life and hers for shared pleasure and some of the events of World War Two

The first tears I ever saw in my mother's face occurred at a dinner party she had with some friends. How old was I...not sure...maybe seven years of age! My mother's... own mother had been French. Our house always echoed with guests with foreign accents. She loved company. It had been a special party because my father was going away again and he was not allowed to tell anyone where, even his family. He was an army officer and with World War Two on the horizon his work was important.

After dinner my mother went to play the piano. She played Chopin, including the Military Polonaise for my father. I was sitting on the staircase when I heard her begin singing Vilja, from "The Merry Widow. I went into the lounge where the guests were. Mother kept singing and playing the piano and beckoned me towards her. I received a quick small embrace with her left arm as she managed to keep the piano going and sing at the same time. I sat by her knee. Her friends applauded the work and one of them said something in French to her. I learned many years later he said that The Merry Widow was one of Hitler's favourite operettas, and he told the story about how in Vienna, Franz Lehar had presented Hitler with a special book commemorating the 500th performance of the operetta.. And, said the friend... Franz Lehar got a medal from Hitler...but his wife is Jewish.

My mother burst into tears. She cried for while, and began talking French to the guests. Then slamming the piano keyboard lid she began sobbing again. She was holding me tightly and I can recall feeling that she was hurting me. My father stood there in the room looking strange. She let me go, went to him and put her head on her shoulder. She turned to look back at me, took me into her arms and shouted at the guests. I could not understand what was said, but the memory of that night remains... the Vilja song ... my mother crying, the sound of piano keyboard lid slamming, the shouting in French and the vivid pain I felt.

It was not until many years later when mother was dying of cancer that I understood what was said that night. When I heard my mother was seriously ill I applied for extended leave from work in NZ to be with her in England. I nursed her daily for several months as she slowly decayed watched with sadness how in her final days she needed the numerous painkillers the doctor pumped into her to stop her pain.

One evening I sat by her bed and she woke up from a long sleep and seemed bright and rested. We talked and she said she knew was dying. She

mentioned how the war had destroyed my father's health. "My Jack", as she called him had not been on the frontline of the war, but in Nigeria and caught malaria and some tropical disease, which had affected his eyesight and possibly gone into his brain. He recovered, but he was weaker and never the strong alert man she had known before the war started.

I asked about the night when she had cried, saying it had affected me. I mentioned how she held me... it had hurt, I said. And the guests – what had they said- and what

had she said? I learned the story from her about the Viennese music and Hitler... telling her guests the Germans were good people, Hitler was bad and she was frightened that if he came to England he would kill her children and that she knew he was already killing other mothers' children in Europe. She said too, our guests had hurt her in her own house, and that the music did not belong to Hitler... she told them she never wanted to play or sing that music again. But, I said... you played more music that evening, I remember ... later ...you opened the piano and played the waltz from The Merry Widow. Yes, she said, I love that music. It makes me happy when I play it. She then began to cry and sob. I waited for her to talk...the said quietly... it was a long time ago, Mum, please do not cry..... but, I must... she said...I will never play it again, ever.

I went to Scotland to get away from Hitler. It sounds unbelievable but during World War II, three and half million people, mostly children, were evacuated from towns and cities to areas deemed safe from bombs by the authorities. When war broke out in September 1939, around one and half million children, mothers, pensioners and hospital patients were relocated in just four days. It was known as Operation Pied Piper, the biggest mass movement of people in Britain's history. Over seven hundred thousand were unaccompanied children, and the same happened to over six hundred thousand children a year later.

I either went from Kings Cross Station in London or Paddington – I don't know which, but I was with my brother David. We each had a little bag and a large label on our jackets held on with string. At the station there were so many people, soldiers with guns, police officers, nurses and adults with papers who kept calling out names. I remember people shouting and many children crying. My mother was there. She kissed us, cried and then we went with some more adults. There were no parents with us. We got on the train and waited. I was in a carriage with mainly boys. There was one

boy, much taller than me and he kept asking everyone to show him what they had in their bags. We all had the same. Every now and again he would take some food from someone's bag and eat it. He'd then push the kid who gave the food from his parcel. One child started to cry and then an adult came into the room. He grabbed the boy doing all the trouble and pulled him outside to the train corridor. Later the boy came back. He was quiet for a while and then started talking.

Do you know why all we kids are here? It's because we are bad. No one likes us anymore, and we being sent to the jungle where we have to find our own food and live with the wild animals? And if we come out of the jungle Hitler will get us.

I was terrified. Several of us began to cry. Me too. A few minutes later a man came into the carriage... somehow, he knew which boy had been making the trouble. The boy was taken out and we never saw him again. I so hated him and hoped the adult had thrown the boy off the train. Later, a woman came into our train compartment to stay with us for a while. She was friendly and talked with us. We told her what the

boy had said. I remember looking at her face and she looked sad. She then took the smallest boy on her lap and said that we were going on a long journey so we would be safe. One boy asked about the jungle and she said there was no jungle and that when we got to where we were going we would see our mothers again.

It was such a journey, I slept several times and every time I woke up I saw that someone else was still sleeping. We then came to where we were going. It was another big railway station. There were soldiers there too and policemen, men with helmets, nurses and so many people who kept looking at sheets of paper and then at the labels we all had. I have no idea what town or city it was, but suddenly my mother appears and the whole world was good again.

We went on another train and through the country. I remember seeing cows and sheep and some goats wondering if they were jungle animals. The women in the train said we were not going to the jungle, but I was not sure. However, with mother looking after David and I, all was well. Nothing bad could happen to us anymore.

The train stopped and I hear a man shout "Craigellachie, Craigellachie, Craigellachie". We got out and I noticed that we were one of only a few

groups of children and adults who left the train. The train took off and we all sat there on this little railway station. A big black car came up and we all went and then we all drove away to a village called Archiestown.

We put into a old house with two stories which I learned later was called The Manse. The owners were an old couple, possible in the seventies. They immediately took a dislike to us. I recall my mother saying with exasperation – why do they asking us again and again why we are here and when are we leaving? We are here to get away from the war. What had happened, was that government has told people they had to take in families from the cities where the bombs where falling. I guess, in this day and age we would be called displaced people.

Before long, mother found a small cottage and we moved into it. I remember the old woman smiling on the day we left. But, sometime later more people came to stay with the old couple.

Soon my mother became a notable person in the village. She was a trained nurse and in constant demand as there was one doctor around and he served numerous villages. The one and only local policeman somehow found a bicycle for my mother, it too was black. She went around with this bicycle and small bag on the back. As children we used to look in this bag when mother was not around. It contains bottles, bandages and other medical mysteries.

I was talking earlier about Vilja- the song and The Merry Widow operetta. Soon we had a piano, I don't know where it came from, but there it was. Once again we would wake up to music in the morning, hear it in the evening and anytime that mother felt she wanted to play and sing.

Now, let me jump in time. The Second World War was now going the way of the allies – as we kids said, we are winning. By this time we had been in the village a long time. Mother had acquired a radio and we listened to the BBC with the news and hearing strange names of bombs had hit places like Hamburg and Dusseldorf. But what was more interesting was that we had a concentration camp set up several kilometres away from the villages. At first there were only Italians there. Later the German prisoners arrived. Before long these Italians were working in the villages doing jobs during the day Before long these Italians were working in the villages doing jobs during the day and going back to the camp at night. People seemed to accept them after a while. Then my mother became involved with the camp. But, let's hold that story for a moment.

Entertainment in the village was a do it yourself affair. Soon, my mother began organising concerts and putting on activities in the local town hall. I was the one person of the three of us children who seemed to enjoy watching the theatre plans evolving and so I accompanied my mother. Before the concerts took place, our piano was moved to the local hall where it stayed for a few days and then came back home. All the concerts had patriotic songs, jokes about Hitler and then at the end we all sang God save the King.

Mother was creating more and more elaborate concerts. The Italian prisoners of war were being seen more and more and were obviously not seen as a threat. One day I went to the hall to be with Mum and there were several Italian prisoners singing songs around the piano. It turned out they were rehearsing for the concert. And when the concert took place these prisoners sang. Their voices were big and my mother really enjoyed their company. I remember them embracing her after the show and not understanding what it was all about. I had only ever seen my father kiss my mother.

The war ended and I came home from boarding school, which I hated, and mother had yet another concert party in the making. The prisoners were still prisoners but they seemed to be everywhere in the village. Some were again in the concert party. When the concert took place there were prisoners singing and one of them played the piano too. I noticed too that there German prisoners there too. The way we kids could tell was their language, it sounded different to the way the Italians talked. Village people did not like the Germans and called them Krauts. Older people were really nasty. Some of them used to spit on the ground after a German prisoner passed them in the street.

World War Two ended and I was at home from one of the awful boarding schools I had attended. There were still prisoners of war in the camps, but the rules were being relaxed and soon the Germans and Italians would be going home. We saw more of them around the village doing small jobs.

There was yet another concert with performers from the camps taking part in some item,. My mother dedicated part this particular concert to the many soldiers who had been fighting in India. She had an affinity with India through a friend of my father, named Monty Barton, who married an Indian woman when he and my father were in India serving in the British Army. Creating India in a small Scottish village was a difficult feat and the

local boys and girls were drawn into taking part. An army photographer came to one performance and took a picture. But, the end of the performance is the part I recall most. There were numerous encores at the end of the concert and my mother took part in many of them. She sang Vilja from *The Merry Widow* operetta. A loud chorus of deep dark male voices joined her and when the song ended there was clapping and shouting from the German prisoners in the audience.