

## Bouncing Back

### A story of life in occupied Jersey

I remember a golden Thursday in early September in 1939, and in Jersey all was calm. I was to be eight in two weeks. The little bronze calves were grazing and lowing contentedly in the pasture, and the yellow wheat was to be harvested the next day. The glittering ocean shone as bright as the penny in my purse, as the white-crested waves drifted lazily towards the shore.

That fateful evening I was sitting by the crackling hearth with my little brother, playing dice. Pa was reading the newspaper and Ma was cooking. It was peaceful in our little Jersey cottage that warm autumn evening as the milky sun sank beneath the sea on the horizon. And then everything changed.

We heard from our neighbour that a war had begun between Britain and Germany. That night, after dinner (bean crock and cabbage bread – my favourite!), Pa kissed us goodbye, put on his cap and told us to 'look after your Ma'. Then he left without another word.

The next spring, in 1940, the neighbours were beginning to evacuate - leaving in groups of ten at a time for England on the tiny, weathered mailboat in the hope that they would be safe there. Nobody knew if it was better to stay or go. We had no idea how long this war would last or if we would ever see them again. Our money was scarce and we had no idea when Pa would be back to provide more.

On 28<sup>th</sup> June, I awoke to the screaming roar of planes and the dull crump of bombs falling on the town of St Helier a few minutes away from the farm where we lived. I grabbed my bicycle and rushed down to the harbour. The local fisherman, who was anchoring his boat, told me what happened. A shell had blasted through my granny's fish stall and all that remained of her was her old wooden cane. I ran back weeping to the farm to tell Ma what had happened.

Then the Germans arrived.

We knew then that things weren't going to be the same again. For the first few months it was quiet – a bad quiet. Germans guarded every street and a silence descended on the land. Food supplies began to run short and we could have a limited amount every day. We did not choose what we got, we got what we were given in our rations. I realise now that Ma must have performed miracles to keep us all fed. Every day she would go out with a determined look on her face and might come back with some fresh vegetables, a piece of butter, or a tiny wedge of cheese.

The Germans began to restrict certain actions, and new laws were made. In 1942 it became illegal to possess a radio, our only way of learning what was going on in the outside world. But a few people had stowed theirs away so all the locals could crowd into the small Jersey attics to listen to the muffled broadcasts. Grandpa spent his evenings submerged in furious concentration, twisting spindly wires together into what would one day be a radio. During the day he hid it under the floorboard, covered with a rug, so the Germans couldn't find it when they searched his house.

The Germans constructed bunkers all around Jersey to keep the British Army out, and what's more they made Russian prisoners of war build them. They were ragged and dirty, with iron shovels slung over their shoulders. I hid in the hedgerow when they came near, terrified I would become one of them with their filthy nails and bony, desperate faces.

Four years passed. Four dull, desperate years. The last of the potatoes were being rationed out at the hideaway where struggling families went for shelter. The farmers gave away the little meat they had long ago. Although we may have had little, the German's supplies were also running out as fast as sand seeps through your hands. The people of the Channel Islands were beginning to starve.

One morning in December in 1944 I peered out of my small attic window and gazed out at the sea behind the barbed wire that had been put up on my beloved beach. A tiny white dot was speeding towards the island. I blinked. Could it really be? A Red Cross ship, come to bring relief to the starving islanders? I shook Ma awake. The next minute we were skipping and running across the dewy grass in our nighties, yelling for joy and dancing even though we were weak with hunger.

A few hours later we received a box from the supplies ship, SS Vega, full to the brim with butter, sugar, tea, tinned meat and many other marvellous things that we had not seen for a long time. The German soldiers got nothing.

From then it only went uphill. Although the Germans surrendered when the war ended and Pa came back, the land is still yet to recover. Trees are to regrow, crops to be planted, terrible days not to be forgotten.

The morning after the British Army arrived I found a tiny sprout growing out of a crack in the pavement. It had been trampled on when the Germans stood there on watch. But it had not been killed. A few vibrant green leaves unfurled gracefully into the light. Like the shoot we will regrow. They attacked, and we resisted. Laughter, hope and joy would return to the island. That is what I call bouncing back.

*(My mum grew up in Jersey and my grandparents live there. This was the inspiration for this story – MR)*