

The Bigger Picture

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- My brother had meningitis when he was 2 and he was in the hospital in Coventry when it was bombed and you would think that, that would have made my mother very anti-German, but it didn't at all, she really believed that what was wrong was the politics and not the people. We saw a German plane come down in the field opposite our house and we were saying oh sort of "good hooray" and so on and my mother she stopped us and said that that father's a father like your father. He has children like you and they eat black bread.

Barbra Cowell's family values sparked an interest in German culture and language which has grown with her throughout her life and career.

- I think an awful lot of people didn't grow up with that atmosphere in their house. I'm hugely grateful that I did because it's determined my life in a way German's been the sort of router for many important experiences in my life. I learnt German at school with a very reluctant Latin teacher. I desperately wanted to learn German because we'd had 2 German girls in fact staying with us in the 1940s and I got on with them very well and I thought that somehow I'd got to understand why we'd fought a war against Germany. One of them, Elka who was still a friend now in fact she came in 1947 I think under the auspices of the Quaker Organisation, but I was born in '37 so was 10 when Elka came. The other one was Ingrid Nosca who came from Cologne and she stayed with us for 3 months. Her father had been an officer in the army and in fact when she went home I went to stay with them and he sat in a corner of the flat and never spoke. It was very odd. He was obviously deeply traumatised.

As Germany lay in ruins, all over Britain people invited German children to come and stay whilst their families rebuilt their lives.

- It was through the Sunday school FT Pane he was a vicar at Southmead Baptist Church and it was him and a lady they planned it. It was their idea to have German children over that had suffered really badly. We could give them a chance to come for a holiday to England and stay with a family so then obviously gave that a lot of thought to of sent their children over they knew they would be treated kindly part of the church environment. I was 13,

we were all 13, girls and boys we were honestly pleased to welcome them into our homes. I think it did us good to realise there were people far worse off than us. I mean my own house our doors and windows had all got blown off. Although, a lot of the town got bombed in Bristol, we didn't suffer anything as badly I don't think as they did over there, we didn't ever go without food. It might have been rationed. I remember queueing up for potatoes with my mum, but I think we realised that we were better off than the German children that came to us. The girl I had was called Hilla Hiltrucht Hartman and she was very shy, very timid. Her parents were very pleased that we were having a German immigrant in our home, very grateful and thankful and they sent a photograph out with all the families there were 6 children and the dad a very big man with the white shirt and shorts on and a big military German cross obviously he would have quite a high position I think somewhere in the German Army or Navy. She didn't want to go out in the beginning. She didn't want to meet a lot of people. She was very shy and very nervous. I had a big double bed in my house in Southmead and she slept with me and I remember hearing her sobbing a few times. My mum didn't understand why she was upset. She thought she was with us so she should be pleased to be here with us. And after the first week she came round a lot was obviously a bit nervous coming to an English home after we bombed all their homes you see, but she was a lovely girl we got on really well and after the month she went back so we did our best and I think she was happy and went home happy. We sent lots of gifts home tins of corn beef and tins of fruit and stuff had a nice letter back from her father I mean we had to get it translated it was all in German so we got it translated to thank us very much and they were just so humble that we had a German child in our home.

But the war was still very fresh in everyone's memory.

- We had people that went to speak to my mum for a few days and 3 years after the war a lot would have been bias and be thinking why are you having a German child in your house that came across I can remember that quite clearly that would have been a lot of the attitude for lots of people and my neighbours I think as well where we lived.

But some relationships have endured.

- Right well I had been writing to Greta since 1948 so I've kept in touch all these years which is 69 so I believe and I am now 82 and she is now 84.

Mary Fowler's family also took part in a Sunday school exchange.

- I mean staying 3 months she got to know neighbours, family, friends. I have spoken to her a few times on the telephone it still always is "How's Mrs Across The Road and everybody else?" I think if you get good bonding friendships no matter how much space goes between you still seem to have seen one another yesterday.

Barbra Cowell and Hilla are now in touch too. Barbara last went to Hannover to see Hilla just 2 months ago.

- We'd kept in touch for a while and then lost touch as you do and then we found one another when we were both in our 50s and in her first letter to me she remembered exactly the clothes that my mother had worn, the food she had cooked, all the things that I had forgotten, but she had remembered, very touching really.

Official twinning exchanges began with youth clubs and schools.

- My school was one of the first to be involved in the school exchange and that was back in 1944. I always remember the day we met them at Temple Meads Station and these 4 very confident, very mature young people came off the train speaking perfect English. About a week later the Council arranged a little party and there were sandwiches and meringues. Now none of us has seen a meringue, but after Elsa said when we arrived we were quite hungry those 4 were so enamoured with the plates of sandwiches that I think Elsa had 8 and the boys ate 14 and we all managed to tackle them in rounds. I didn't go to Hannover until 1953. Elsa's family were very welcoming and one of the first expressions was that we didn't want our 2 countries to go to war. The war was very up in most of our minds those early years, but who better to start a process of friendship than those the youth really?

- *Hannover 26th of September 1947*

Dear Family Dicks. I suspect that my letter I wrote you in May has not arrived. Therefore I am trying once again to get in touch with you. After a few weeks stay in a transit camp in Colchester I safely arrived at home on April the 22nd. The passage was a bit stormy by the excitement of that had seized nearly all of us we didn't get any sleep. 7 o'clock in the morning we saw the German coast emerging from the cold form gloomy and dim almost like a presentment of what was going to be our experience at home. At about noon after an absence of many years I was standing on German soil at last. I cannot describe the feeling to be at home again as a free man. The sun was shining most beautifully when I arrived at my wife at 4pm. Since she didn't know anything about my coming, the surprise was complete and the joy overwhelming. Too bad you couldn't be with us when we were unpacking. You should have seen the face of my wife when I brought into the daylight the presents. The marmalade and the tea have done her good. The dress, the shoes fit like they were made for her. As my wife was totally bombarded March 1945, she possessed nothing but the things she was wearing. You can imagine her surprise and joy. She cried and could hardly grasp that there were still people helping so

altruistically strangers who are in want. In the evening we went to the parents and relations. The whole family was assembled and there were lots of questioning and narrating. What did my dear ones have to do it is terrible. Then after I tell them again and again how you my host endeavoured to ease my lot as much as possible. Even today I'm frequently asked as a former prisoner of war I'm asked "how are the people?" and "how is life in England?" I always like to give account of your large mindedness of all my friends in England. I shall not forget them. I hope that I've amused you little with my playing on your wonderful piano. My wife had the opportunity 1946 to buy an old piano. That and 4 chairs are our only property now. You can imagine how disconsolate conditions are for people like us who are totally bombed out. There's practically nothing you can buy. The prospects are quite cloudy for us, but we will not lose courage. For today this might be enough. Once again I thank you with all my heart for everything you've done for me and my wife.

Very sincerely yours

Howard and wife