

Jessica Holmes

Hannah

During the winter of 1941, Stalin's army grasped hold of Germany, destroying what was left of the architecture under a mass of bombs, and forcing families out of their homes. At just three years old, Hannah Duquesne was a part of this movement. Hannah and her family were evacuated aboard a Swedish passenger ship from her hometown in Koenigsberg. Koenigsberg was later renamed Kalienengrad and forcefully claimed as part of Russia. Around 80,000 Germans were evacuated and sent overseas via ship which travelled across the Baltic sea.

The ship Hannah boarded contained hundreds of women and children, who were given priority over the men. Despite the strict passenger rules, Hannah's Grandfather managed to sneak on board, finding a hiding spot for himself in the cellar. It was predicted that around 9,000 people died on board the ship due to tough living circumstances and life-threatening weather conditions.

Hannah recounts having to sleep in a pull-out draw alongside the other children due to lack of space, she also remembers all of them having to wear their life jackets - at all times. But what Hannah remembers most vividly is the frozen sea. Shards of ice sprawled out as far as the eye could see. She recounts countless dead bodies frozen in their wake as the steel body of the ship cut through.

Upon arriving in the Spa town of Hannover, Hannah was to discover the existence of the Kings of Hannover, descendants of the British Royal Family. She also discovered that the town was split into four different zones and occupied by either Russian, French, British or American soldiers. Eventually, the zones were dissolved and handed back over to Germany.

Hannah tells me that after the death of Hitler there was a mixed reaction among the population.

"How did we not know that 6 million Jewish people had died under Hitler's rule?" Hannah remembers having the conversation with her 'Aunty' and being told that most had just assumed that they had left, been evacuated, or migrated to other parts of Europe. Of course, there were many that were relieved by Hitler's death - but there were equally as many who mourned him, and who worried about how they would support themselves and their families now that they were not working for his regime.

Hannah has pleasant memories of growing up in Hannover. Of playing with the other children amongst the rubble, and bomb sites, and cycling alongside the Maschteich Lake. Hannah grew up with her first husband, and still remains friends with him and his family until this day. She moved to Scotland at age 40, where she met her French-born second husband, and they have been together for 30 years. Hannah now works part-time as an Art therapist which she finds helps her process and reflect upon her eventful past. She tells me, "It's my life."