

Operation Pied Piper

Jean Daish was born in Leeds and is the wife of a former Royal Air Force Officer. Along with son Andrew and daughter Susannah, the family became used to moving house throughout Great Britain and overseas. Cornwall was home for several years.

Inspired by the birth of her first of four grandchildren sixteen years ago, Jean attended a writing course and began writing short stories, articles and poetry for children. *Operation Pied Piper* is her first book.

Following twenty-seven house moves during their time with the RAF, Jean and her husband are now settled in Buckinghamshire.

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Olympia Publishers
London

www.olympiapublishers.com
OLYMPIA PAPERBACK EDITION

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-84897-281 0

First Published in 2013

Olympia Publishers
60 Cannon Street
London
EC4N 6NP

Printed in Great Britain

Dedication

For Susannah

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Margaret Nash, published children's author and 'SMARTIE' prize winner, for all the tuition, encouragement and friendship, which I have received over many years.

My thanks go also to my 'writing group' friends in Winslow.

Thanks to Kim Richardson for his wise council.

Thank you for my grandchildren, Patrick, Jonathan, Tilly and Theo – who are my inspiration and joy – and the rest of my family.

A great big thank you to my husband John, who has shown great patience during the book's development; I could not have written *Operation Pied Piper* without his practical and emotional support.

PROLOGUE

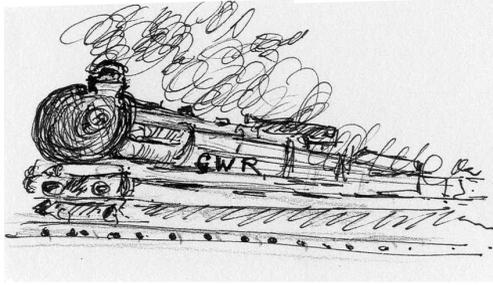
Evacuation means ‘leaving a place’. During the Second World War, many children living in big cities and towns were moved, temporarily, from their homes to places considered safer, usually out in the countryside or by the sea. The British evacuation began on Friday 1st September 1939. It was called ‘Operation Pied Piper’.

This is the story of a group of children evacuated to Cornwall. For some children evacuation was a big adventure, but for others, never having been away from home before, there would have been confusion and even fear. But there were friendships to be made also and many lasted, not just for the duration of the War, but for a lifetime.

The children in this story are fictional but ‘Operation Pied Piper’ was a real event.







CHAPTER 1

1st September 1939

The Departure

I stood on Leeds City Station platform with my gloved hand in Aunt Jean's, looking around at the hoards of children. Glum, tired, all shapes, sizes and ages clutching their pathetic cases, precious teddies and with their brown boxed gas masks hung over drooping shoulders. A sorry army of children being torn apart from their families. The younger ones not understanding. That was the worst part. We were evacuees being transported away from our homes to safety. Or so we were told. I slipped off my glove and felt the warmth of Auntie's hand over mine.

"It's Government policy love – for your own safety and it won't be forever – you'll see. You'll love the country and the sea Polly – you will. Much warmer than up here." Aunt Jean dabbed at her eyes, smiling unconvincingly. A quick peck on my cheek and I was gently ushered into a carriage. There was an overpowering smell of soot, dirt and fear.

"There, you can sit next to that little girl in the brown coat – she looks as if she could do with a friend."

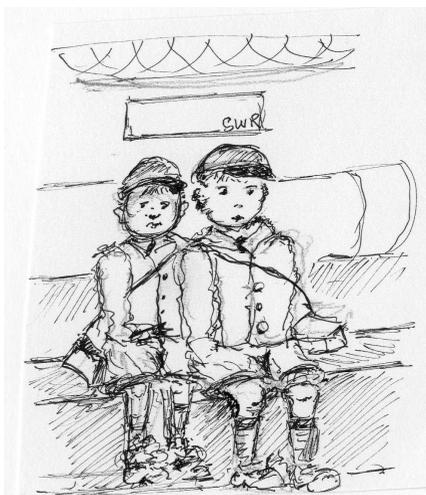
There was an ear splitting whistle and a grinding and groaning of metal and the train slowly shunted forward. The platform filled with steam and I could just make out Aunt Jean waving her handkerchief. She was shouting something but it was impossible to hear her. I hadn't even said goodbye. I sank miserably into my seat as the train increased speed.

There were four of us in the carriage. Two scruffy little boys about seven and an older girl in a forlorn brown coat. There was a dank, dirty smell – probably one of the boys. I shuffled closer to the girl.

“Would you like to share my dinner?” I said, reaching into the brown paper bag and retrieving a potted meat sandwich. Without a word the sandwich was snatched from my fingers and plunged into the girl's mouth. I reached across and gave two to the boys.

“I feel sick,” said the boy with a shock of blond curls.

“I'll 'ave it,” said the other devouring one sandwich and shoving the other into his coat pocket.



Through the carriage door and down the corridor I could hear quiet chatter. There was some crying but also the sound of excited voices. For some of the children this was a big adventure. But as I sank deeper into the corner of the carriage, wrapping my coat closer around me, I just felt a sickening dread.

I woke up with the taste of salty potted meat in my mouth, feeling very thirsty. I reached into my paper bag for a small bottle of milk. The girl had moved to sit opposite me with the boys. She had her feet up on the seat – her shoes touching my coat. I saw the holes in the soles and one shoe had a lace missing. She stirred, yawned and scratched her head.

“Got any more of them sandwiches?”

“Fraid not,” I lied. “You can have the rest of my milk though.”

Once again the grubby hand reached out and snatched the bottle without a word of thanks.

“Ere you boys – ’ave a sip.” Slurping down the remains of the milk, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand then threw the bottle onto the floor where it rumbled under the seat.

“What’s that name on your label then?” She peered at the label on my coat.

“Polly,” I replied, reaching under the seat to retrieve the empty bottle.

“That’s a funny name,” she giggled.

“Ow old are ya?”

“I’ll be eleven in two days’ time on 3rd September. You’re Vera,” I said scanning the label on the brown coat.

“I am that – named after me Mam. It’s short for Veronica, I’m ten as well.”

We sat in silence, gazing through grimy windows onto the backs of equally grimy houses.

“Was that your Mam then – that woman that saw ya off?”

“No, it was my Auntie Jean – my mother died last year. She was very ill.” I felt a sudden rush of homesickness mingled with panic and, to my horror, tears filled my sore eyes and spilled over onto my lap.

“Sorry,” said Vera clumsily. She sniffed loudly, placed her grubby shoes down on the floor and settled herself into the corner.

“Got any brothers and sisters then ’ave ya?”

My pretence at being asleep hadn’t worked.

“No – there’s just me – what about you?”

“Me brother’s in the army – ’e’s been away ages. Too bloomin’ long Mam says. I can ’ear her crying at night sometimes. There’s me Dad but Mam says ’e’s worse than a man short. ’E’s only got one leg, well two really but one’s wooden.”

I hid a smile.

The train suddenly lurched forward and one of the boys landed on my lap.

“Oooh look, Polly.”

Vera leapt to her feet and pointed to the distant sea.

“Flippin’ ’eck – that’s grand, that is – never seen so much water outside Cookridge Baths.”

I brushed my coat sleeve where one of the boys had wiped his nose.

“What’s that about Cookridge Baths?”

“Me Mam, Dad and me – we all go to Cookridge Street Baths once a week for a hot bath. We’re too big for the tin baths, you see.”

“You mean you don’t have a bathroom?”

“No – toffee nose – we don’t ’ave a bathroom. And the lav’s outside and it’s freezing – and we use newspaper to wipe our bums. So there!!”

For the next few hours, except for stops at deserted country stations, the train rumbled on until we reached Plymouth.

After crossing the Brunel Bridge, which I knew was the bridge which joined Devon to Cornwall, the train increased speed as if it couldn’t wait to despatch its cargo of desolate children on to Bodmin Moor.

Finally, the tired old iron horse drew into Bodmin Station. There was an immediate increase in noise and anxious faces were pressed to the windows. Struggling into coats and retrieving battered suitcases, we all waited for the next move. Would anyone be there on the platform to meet us? Where would we have to go? One of the boys snivelled.

“I wanna go ’ome to me Mam,” he gulped.

“Well ya can’t so shurrup,” said his brother.

Vera put an arm around the boys.

“Don’t worry love – we’ll stick together.” She wiped his nose with the hem of her blouse.

What on earth did she mean – ‘we’ll stick together?’ I didn’t want to stay another minute with this lot!

CHAPTER 2

There was chaos on the platform. Adults were patrolling, their flashlights piercing the gloom, as they separated the children into groups. As names were called the groups became more orderly, but subdued. We were a sorry sight – like bundles of clothing being sorted for the laundry, instead of sad little people, homesick and fearful. I had no idea where Vera and the boys were.

“Please can I hold your hand?” said a small girl at my side.

Two little girls, twins I think, stood beside me; I took a small, cold hand in mine.

“Where are we going?” said one. The other was whimpering.

“Padstow,” I said. “I’ve got Quay Cottage on my instructions – let me see – yes – yours is the same. Where’s your gas mask?” I asked one.

“I left it on the train.”

“Don’t move either of you – I’ll go and get it.”

One of the helpers was handing out supplies of spare gas masks. I grabbed one and returned to the girls.

“Come on – we have to board that coach – stay close and don’t lose your gas mask again. Don’t cry – I’m not cross – hurry!”

I found a seat behind the driver, threw my bag underneath and put the girls in the seat behind me.

“Try and have a sleep,” I said to the one with her thumb firmly stuck in her mouth, her eyes drooping. “It could be a while before we get to Padstow.”

Wrapping my coat around me, running my fingers through the condensation on the window, I tried to see through the murk what was happening outside. Over the cacophony of voices and hissing steam, I recognised Vera’s raucous shout!

“Come on lads follow me – flippin’ ’eck don’t ya want to get to the seaside?”

I sank lower into my seat as Vera and the boys rushed past to the coach behind.

“Everyone OK?” shouted the driver. There were a few weary replies as the coach lurched forward and gathered speed as it left the chaos of the station and headed for Padstow. I woke with a jolt. The coach was steaming downhill jogging its passengers from their drugged sleep.

“Hold tight – we’re here now – just heading for the quay.”

Four tight little fists gripped the back of my seat as we came to a halt. It was pitch black outside the coach, but we could hear the wind and raging seas and it sounded very close.

“Come on girls, we’re here – make sure you have everything,” I encouraged them, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice. The twins hung on to my coat as we huddled together waiting for more instructions.



“I’m cold,” said one.

“Me too,” said the other. I couldn’t see their faces, but I felt their trembling.



We were guided through the gloom towards a cottage on the quay. A warm glow seeped through the crack in the front door but all the windows were blacked out. The driver banged on the door which was opened by a tiny, round lady.

“Three for you, Mrs Trewithen,” he said pushing us gently forward.

“Goodness me – you poor lambs. Come in this instant and close the door quickly after you – blackout regulations, but you know all about that don’t ’ee.”



A large man with flaming red hair, a red beard and a patch over one eye came forward. “This ’ere is Mr Trewithen girls, my husband, but you can call him Denzil. Everyone calls me Mother but you won’t want to do that will ’ee my lovelies? Take their things upstairs Denzil while I get them something to eat.”

Mrs Trewithen leant down and gently helped the little girls out of their coats, all the time cooing and comforting them, rubbing their freezing hands between her warm plump ones.

“Is the man a pirate?” asked one of the girls.

“Goodness no, my lovely – just a big soft old lad – so don’t ’ee be afraid. Now for some hot soup and then bed.”

We fell on our soup, exhausted and hungry.

“Right climb the stairs to Bedfordshire then Polly, and you two...”

“Nellie,” replied one twin and “Rose,” said the other.

My room was sparse. There was a three-quarter bed, a side table, small wardrobe and chest of drawers. The window almost touched the floor. At least I had a room to myself. I undressed quickly without washing, although there was a jug of water and a bowl on the table, and a chamber pot under the bed. I could hear the girls next door and through the window the sound of the angry sea. I climbed wearily into the bed, delighted to find a hot water bottle. I was comfortable but homesick, my stomach was leaden, my eyes burned with unshed tears. Be brave, Auntie had said. But how brave must I be and for how long?

