



English  
Girl,

**German  
Boy**

WORLD WAR II FROM BOTH SIDES ■

By  
Tessa and Martin  
B rner

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# Chapter One

## *My Mother, Peggy*

My mother was born Ellen Margaret Davies on October 7, 1909 in the small coal mining town of Mountain Ash, Glamorgan, South Wales. She was known as Peggy all her life. Her parents were Francis Davies born September 3, 1872 in Mountain Ash, and Ellen Williams born March 24, 1877 in Angle, Pembrokeshire, Wales. Peggy was the second youngest of their six children, and she took after her father as the only dark-haired child. The others all inherited beautiful red gold hair the colour of a gold coin and vivid blue eyes from Ellen.

Peggy's paternal grandmother was Elizabeth Picton, born in 1839 in Martletwy, Pembrokeshire. Family legend says there is a possible connection to Sir Thomas Picton, a famous Welsh general during the war with France, and also to Picton Castle. Most researchers think all the Pictons are linked since they descended from

two Norman knights, brothers William and Philip de Picton, the original owners of

*Peggy and her family circa 1913. Her mother is seated with Peggy on her knee, her father is standing with eldest sister Elizabeth (Bessie) and eldest brother David who died in a mining accident. Standing in front on the left is Herbert, and Peggy's favourite brother Clifford is on the right. A sixth child, Sidney, was not yet born.*



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Picton Castle. They came from Normandy with William the Conqueror in 1066 and tried to conquer the Welsh but were unsuccessful. The Picton name is not a common one and is mostly found in Pembrokeshire, Wales, although there are towns in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand which bear the Picton name.

Ellen Williams had a Canadian connection through her half-brother Harry Williams who emigrated to Canada around 1871 and settled in Cornwall, Ontario. His brother Thomas left for Canada later. Harry and Thomas prospered in the new world working in real estate and the hotel business. Harry was said to have been mayor of Cornwall and the builder of the Cornwallis Hotel. Thomas had a son Evan Thomas who died September 7, 1958 without issue and left an inheritance of \$55,161 to my grandmother. He also left properties at 130 Third St. West and 241–243–245 York St., Cornwall.

Francis and Ellen Davies brought up their family in Mountain Ash. It was not a pretty place. Mines scarred the beautiful Welsh valley, slag heaps dotted the landscape, and coal dust was everywhere. Most of the people worked in the mines—it was a tough life. Coal was used as fuel in fireplaces to heat houses and cook meals, and to fuel steam engines. It was an important commodity before electricity and gas.

Although my grandfather—known as Dad Dad to his grandchildren—worked as a coal hewer, he had other interests. He should have been a doctor, but the family could not afford to pay for his education. Instead, he was head of St. John Ambulance Brigade for the whole Aberdare valley, and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps during World War I. However, his greatest achievement was becoming a noted herbalist who

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# Chapter Two

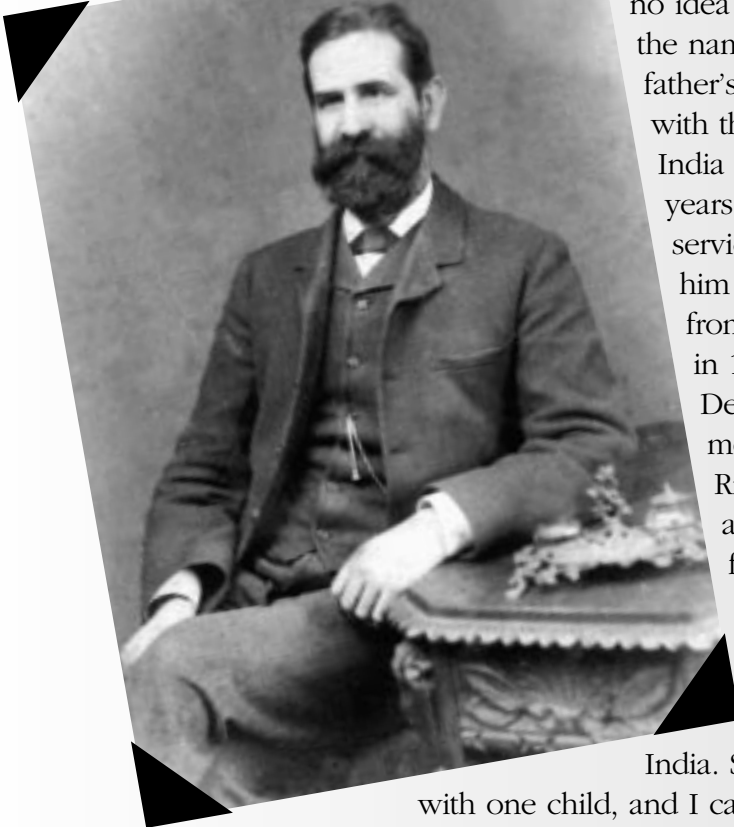
## *My Father, Jack Osbourne Durling*

My father was born in London May 16, 1905, the youngest of five children, and he had two brothers and two sisters. His father, Edward Durling, had been with the British army in India and among other things was a tobacconist. Apparently he left the family when my father was quite young and totally disappeared from their lives. His mother Lucy died at age 49 of chronic nephritis when my father was eight years old.

My grandmother's father was Charles Osborn (I have no idea why the spelling of the name changed with my father's birth) who was with the British army in India and Burma for 8 years. According to his service records, it took him 3 months to sail from England to India in 1858 in time for the Delhi Mutiny. His regiment, The King's Rifles, 60th Foot, actually marched from India to

Burma! He met his future wife, Mary Agnes Shepherd (nee Florence), in India. She was a widow with one child, and I can only presume her

*Tessa's great-grandfather, Charles Osborn, born in 1839. He served with the British army in India and Burma, 1858-1866. He met and married Mary Agnes Shepherd (nee Florence) in India, and a daughter, Florence was born in Rangoon, Burma. He later taught military training at Eton college in England.*



husband must have also been with the army and died there. Charles was honourably discharged after 21 years of service, and became a Chelsea Pensioner. He then taught military training at the famous British public school Eton College, and, according to the 1881 census, lived in the headmaster's lodge with his family of 10. There is a well-known saying that the battles of England were won on the playing fields of Eton. I like to think that maybe he played a role somehow in training some of England's famous generals!

The Durlings have Lord Horatio Nelson in their family tree. My great-uncle Arthur Edgar Durling married Annie Baker Suckling, a descendant of the famous admiral, one of England's greatest heroes who died in the Battle of Trafalgar defending his country against Napoleon. My father's brother Arthur married Dorothy Tollemache, descended from the Earl of Dysart, a former owner of Ham House in Richmond, England, which now belongs to the National Trust. The Tollemache family were also brewers and Tolley's Breweries still exist



*Lucy Osborn, born in 1872, Tessa's paternal grandmother. She married Edward James Durling in Darenth, Kent in 1892 and died at the age of 49 of chronic kidney disease. This portrait of her was painted on porcelain, a custom among comfortably off Victorians.*



### *My Father, Martin*

*Hotel Schmiedeberg, early 1900's, owned by Martin's grandfather, Clemens Schenk. It was the favourite stopover for the kings of Saxony on their way to their hunting castle in the mountains.*

In 1914, at age 24, my father was drafted into the army of the Kaiser. He was a telephone linesman, connecting the front lines to the command posts in the rear. He served in the Alsace-Lorraine in France, and also in Serbia. When he came home in 1918, the country was in shambles. With the Treaty of Versailles, the victorious Allies wanted to make sure that Germany would never get on its feet again. The results were catastrophic. There was starvation for three years, followed by hyperinflation for another three years which wiped out any savings. Then a new currency was introduced which was based on gold. It was a good idea for stability, but

nobody had any money, and there was very little money in circulation. There were no jobs, as industry was shackled by the Treaty of Versailles.

Germany had produced the world's leading composers, poets, philosophers, scientists, engineers, architects, and artists, and now it was being kept down in despair and hopelessness. Then came the stock market crash in 1929, which added to the existing problems. Is it any wonder that a demagogue like Adolf Hitler got hold of the minds of the people in 1933 by promising work, pride, and a better future?

The currency quickly changed, its value based on German work, not gold. Roads were built, industries grew, exports started up, there was food and pride. Along with this, there was a buildup of armed forces. Within three years, the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin were a great success, but they were also used as a great propaganda tool. In 1937, my father had enough confidence to expand our inn by adding a verandah restaurant seating 60 guests. But then political tensions grew with the marches into Austria, Sudetenland, and the Saarland. In 1939, only six years after Hitler's takeover, Germany had the most modern army in the world. World War II started, and it ended six years later in 1945 with the almost total destruction of Germany. My father next lived under Russian occupation, and until his death in 1973, he lived in the East German Republic, under Communism. None of the disasters he had to overcome were of his own making.

belonged to one of the fire fighting units, I put on my brown overalls and steel helmet, strung the round container with

the gas mask over my shoulder, and went into the shelter. Shortly after, one of the senior men came down the stairs and said, "It's a big raid, the Christmas trees are all over the sky!" Christmas trees were clusters of flares on small parachutes. They were dropped as markers, indicating where the bombers which followed were to unload their cargo. This was not a precision bombing raid on military targets. This was a blanket bombing raid designed to start huge fires and to kill as many people as possible to demoralize the enemy.

*Hof Kirche, Castle and Semper Opera House.*

And then it started: boom, boom, and boom—not bad we thought. We did not know that a rain of incendiary bombs had hit the city. After 30 minutes it calmed down and the main warden, my roly poly head-waiter, said to me: "Go to the roof and report any damage." As I ran up the stairs, I put on my gas mask. The top floor was full of smoke. A young fellow from Holland was there clutching a column and sliding down, overcome by smoke. I do not know how he got there, but he had no gas mask and was obviously suffocating. I grabbed him, dragged him to the wide carpeted hotel stairs, and rolled him down. I remember he bounced down the stairs onto a landing, where the air was still clear. He got up on wobbly feet and continued down. I never saw him again.

*Bellevue Hotel on the Elbe River and Semper Opera House.*

I found the door to the attic, climbed a wooden stair, and looked both ways. There was fire everywhere. Within seconds I stepped down the stairs, only to find the side of the stairs was already on fire. Liquid phosphorous (like napalm) dropped in canisters had burst on



the floor as the shockwave hit. A bomb had exploded close to the door, but the door held. I still wonder today, would our lungs have survived the air pressure if the door had been open? When the rumbling finally stopped, I fell asleep totally exhausted, only to wake up five hours later when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was my father who said, "Come, it's time to go home."

One of the surviving statues of saints on the parapet of the church overlooking the destroyed city, asking "why?"

The night before, my father was in the *Buschhaus* about 35 km south of Dresden in the mountains when he saw the sky turning bright red on the horizon above Dresden. When he heard the rumbling of the explosions, he said to my mother, "I have to go to Dresden to get our boy out." All he had was an old bicycle which he rode to the edge of town, arriving about 8 a.m. The town was a sheet of flames, and he thought, "My God, will I find my boy alive?"

He searched for an open street to get to the hotel at the river, but could not find one because the heat was too intense. He heard a voice calling for help and turned around and found a man half covered by rubble. He pulled him out. Seconds later, the façade of a burning house in front of him collapsed, just where he would have been had he not helped the man. He took



his scarf, wet it, and put it in front of his nose to keep the smoke out. Finally he found the *Grosse Garten*, a long park leading from the outskirts to the river Elbe. He walked to the river and then along the bank toward the hotel. When he arrived, he saw the hotel had collapsed. Remembering where I had pointed out the exit door on the side of the riverbank leading to our shelter, he found the door, removed some rubble, opened it to climb in