

Chapter Three

When I was five and about 10 months (Feb '45) my mother and I left Mauritius. Was it because my parents were not getting on? I guess so although I have no real idea. I believe my Aunt Emma was also coming with us but possibly she obtained a berth after the first cyclone. It may be possible that it was she who was travelling and my mother and I took the opportunity to travel with her. Aunt Emma had from birth suffered from one leg being shorter than the other. Perhaps she was travelling to Europe to have something done about it. I wonder why we travelled when a war was on in Europe.

The departure was difficult. We left I think in February but a cyclone blew up and we could not leave for about a week, when we eventually set off another cyclone followed the first and we had to return to port. My memories of this are dim.

The war was of course still going on and we were to travel in convoy being protected by war ships. There must have been about thirty to forty ships in the convoy, it was an impressive sight, all painted battle ship grey. Ships in these days ran on coal and they all belched out smoke from time to time. I don't think any of them had names on them, perhaps I could not read. We had lifeboat drill daily at about 10.30 and we got good at it. I do remember seeing my first half-penny with a sailing ship on it¹. The war ships would tow a target and have shooting practice. The weather was not good, perhaps the cyclone when we set off gave me this impression, I do not remember sunny skies although crossing the equator would surely have been a warm period. It was thus that we went through the Indian Ocean.

I had worms as usual, these were usually ring worm but this time I remember waking up one morning having coughed up the equivalent of an earth worm, at least six inches long.²

We had a cabin for the three of us.

I believe that I had my sixth birthday on board and had a cake. I cannot remember any party.

In the Red Sea it must have been very hot because one of our stokers died of heat stroke. There was a burial at sea. It was a simple moving ceremony. We definitely slowed down but I am not so sure if we stopped, the war was on and we had to keep up with the convoy.

The stoker was presumably a Christian; the Captain read a few words and the weighted body which had been on a board wrapped in a tarpaulin was slipped over the side.

Eventually we arrived in Aden. Dramatic incidents happened here which left a big impression on me.

I think we docked at about 2pm, it was definitely light, we had to disembark, and presumably we had to change ship. Everything went reasonably well, my mother saw our luggage being craned over the side but a rope came loose and all our belongings fell into the sea. I am not sure if they were ever recovered. I now wonder if this happened to every ship docking in Aden, the locals making a reasonable living off the goods thus stolen.

By the time we got ashore it was late and dark. All accommodation had been taken; there was nowhere to go so we stayed in the dock area. We were not the only ones to spend a night in a warehouse. The Army, the British were in charge there, came to our rescue and gave us a drink and some Horlicks tablets. To this day I hate Horlicks!³I

¹ Try to obtain one and make a rubbing of the ship

² Find an earth worm and measure it---get mummy to help holding it down

³ See if you can get hold of Horlicks tablets and try one. The powder is obtainable, try it with milk

say it is the taste, but is it the association with the circumstances in which I was given it?

Aden was a ghastly place, it stank of rotting garbage or sewage---and we could smell it a mile off in the ship. What a place to live!

I remember being on this rather nice clean ship. Was it the original ship or another? It had to be re-coaled. Today they would find a way of moving coal in bulk but in 1945 things were different. This coal was in sacks and they needed about six barges of the stuff to re-fuel our vessel. The temperature must have been near 40 degrees C and tugs brought the coal out to the ship. They set up a system of platforms held together by rope, each platform being about 8 feet high. Several men on each platform would throw a sack up to the next platform until it reached the top.

I wonder if I have this correctly; why did they not use cranes? Why did they have to send the coal to the top deck? Questions which you could research? I can only tell what I remember---it may not be right. Have you shovelled coal? It is a filthy and extremely dusty affair and in this case despite being in sacks there was a lot of dust lying everywhere. Our captain did not want his ship to be covered in coal inside and out and the obvious answer was to close every porthole, bulkhead, ventilator and door in, on and to the ship. This he did and in the ambient temperature it became an oven---too much for us to bear. We had to go ashore; I remember nothing about the shore, except for the smell. The trip down the gangway is fresh in my memory: I had to walk in the blood!

Let us go back to the bit where it says “they needed about six barges of the stuff to re-fuel our vessel”. One of these barges had a native on it who had had a horrific accident. One leg had all the flesh taken from the front, from thigh to toe. This man screamed so that it could be heard throughout town. This went on for a good long time as the barge was being towed slowly by a tug. Suffice it to say he eventually came up our gangway and was treated by our ships doctor. I had nightmares about this incident for many years after.

I am beginning to wonder if all this happened in Aden, maybe some of it happened in Suez⁴. It has no real importance, I am fairly sure the ghastly smell was Aden. Somehow we got going again and made our way to Suez, here we got stuck. No ship could take us to England, there were many of us in a similar situation. I cannot remember details but we did end up in a brand new camp in Ismalia⁵. No one had been there before us and I am not sure for whom it had been built, possibly for German prisoners. There were rows, well just two rows, of WCs, about 30 in each row, with a bucket under the seat. It had a playground with fantastic long slides, the trouble was that one had to walk there and because of the fences one could not walk directly there. One had to wade into the lake a few yards to round the fence. Obviously one would get wet and the water looked very uninviting and was reputed to harbour electric eels, one had to hire a little Egyptian boy to pull you round in a small boat. It probably cost one penny (old style). Once there one could use all the equipment all day long and I did; being brand new the slides had not been run-in and as they were made of wood my behind was the first to polish it. Ooh! I did have some bad splinters in my behind.

We were in this camp for about three weeks, regrettably I remember nothing else about it but we got moving again, this time by train across the desert. It was hot, the toilets were terrible and I believe that we had hardly any water, nevertheless I needed a pee. My mother held me up to the window. No sooner than I had sat down than an

⁴ Look at the map is Suez in the Mediterranean or the Red Sea?

⁵ Ismalia is I think Al Ishmalia---look it up on the map.

irate woman came from the next carriage saying that it had started raining! Obviously it was I who was to blame; I think it ended all very good-humouredly.

I think we could see the pyramids from our carriage but this could be wishful thinking on my part.

We must have embarked again at Port Said because we eventually arrived in the Port of Liverpool but we were not allowed to disembark until VE Day, 8th May 1945. We stayed in dock for a whole week with very little to do, a few yards from the land which we had spent three months trying to reach, I think everyone was frustrated.

I believe we got a train to London and then a taxi to 28 St Gabriels, no one was there to greet us and the place was locked. The taxi driver crawled through the downstairs lavatory window which was quite high---he probably had to break the glass to do so. It was suggested that I crawl through the window but either I was too shy, thought I might get lost or for some other reason refused.

Granny and Grandpa were in Buxted and had no idea when we would arrive.

So life in England began. Austerity and rationing, smog⁶ and bomb damage, my mother was a “single woman”; it was not an easy time.

How aunt Emma fared I know not but her leg was never sorted, she lived with the Buzenac (Jean Buzenac married a Mazerieux) family in Poitiers, and when Jean died with the Mazerieux sisters near the Gare St Lazare in Paris.

⁶ What is smog? How far could one see in the worse cases?