

Why I Wear A White Poppy?

Aged 95, still with beautiful auburn hair and soft Edinburgh accent; my grandmother came from Portobello. Born on the same street, she claimed, as Sir Harry Lauder. Winifred Margaret, 12/5/08; her brother Charles and sister Agnes, another flame haired Celt, a few years older. They were part Scots, a bit Polish, part German, a bit Czech, part Irish, they were Catholics, but the family name, Mutzke, is Jewish.

Their father was born in Krönland Böheme, now in the Czech Republic. My great-grandfather, Oswald-Franz, was a glass blower, his whole family were. They were *very* Bohemian! Multi-lingual, travelling throughout Europe; he worked a while in Russia, France and Italy. Settling in Scotland, he married pretty half-Irish Sarah, daughter of Dunbar's notorious Timothy Flynn; a June wedding in 1904, I still wear her ring today. They thrived, my grandmother had a wealth of cousins! Renting tenements on the Kings Road, living according to their means, they certainly weren't *Poor*.

Life continued happily until September 1914 when the brothers were incarcerated on the Isle of Man. (So was Wilhelm Kordes, one of my rose growing heroes, doubtless you grow one of his roses, Iceberg?)

"We spoke *exactly* like our neighbours, Father only spoke English at home. I couldn't understand why they called us "Jarrmen Pigs". 80 years a southerner, she still maintained a pronounced burr. Agnes and Winifred attended a convent school; even here adults stood by as children taunted. Banned, too, from participation on trips out, the zoo maybe, prohibited from any treats, bananas perhaps, the nuns persistently reiterated "Nessie and Win's father is German".

Throughout that atrocious zeitgeist their suffering was mild. Peoples' ability to think rationally was impaired during, and for a long time after, four years' heinous revulsion. Even lowly insignificant hamlets have a war memorial, even *here* people were KILLED. From the Cenotaph in central London cascading across Europe to all nooks and crannies, the humblest village, the most idyllically chocolate-boxy backwater; men DIED. Just imagine, most of the lads in *our* community, SLAUGHTERED or DAMAGED *this* afternoon. It happened in SO MANY places. And in many countries it STILL does. Please give to the British Legion, their work is invaluable. Oswald-Franz lost a brother-in-law to the first war, his oldest boy, Charlie, to the second.

With gently trembling hands, their parched translucence of extreme old age held mine. During this hateful war period her favourite cousin Paul-Oskar died "playing" on the tenement stairwell, days before his tenth birthday; vague rumours of bigger boys on higher floors chasing "German" youngsters.

In peacetime two uncles were "repatriated" to Germany. Cousins sent to Dresden simply because a dead grandfather was born there, in 1859! They spoke no German, their clear Scotch voices making obvious targets, they were called "Englischer Swine". English was about the only thing *none* of them were.

Around 1920 others moved to London, three further siblings and my father were born. Growing vegetables under a plot now engulfed by the O² arena, Oswald-Franz constructed a still, and unlike on your allotment, brewed schnapps amongst his cabbages and carrots.

Did it give my grandmother confidence and clarity, aged 85, to fiercely chastise a silly young woman after a particularly ignorant statement? At the Ber-Mitzvah for her youngest great-nephew, this girl attempted to castigate the females' suitability to conduct religious services. "Women are dirty because they have periods!" (In the Reform Synagogue we'd just attended a beautiful service conducted by a very competent lady rabbi – thankfully post-menopausal). Englishly, we stood speechless. "More gefilte fish Aunty Win.....?" "It is, the hand, that rocks, the cradle, that rules, the world, AND DON'T YOU EVER FORGET IT!" One of the profoundest statements a person made, *I wonder* if the woman remembers?

Had it empowered her as a young woman to take the newborn and herself straight out of a violent marriage to the safety of her parents? Not so surprising today, don't forget these were Catholic families in 1935; luckily she wasn't marched straight back! Her husband grew up in a brutal household, she didn't want my father raised in that environment then perpetuating the abuse. I remember plenty of fall-out from this separation, I'm not a doddering relic writing a memoir, I'm 47½ years old.

Red to me always symbolises hate, aggression and anger, white; peace, compromise, and compassion. Whenever I see a war memorial, grand or modest, (every time I pass the lump of rock near Fore Street), the first vision in my mind is Grandma's russet apple face with tear streamed nonagenarian cheeks as she recounted some of her life. Then made me promise *never* to hurt people through violence.

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