

Ruth Johnson – Memories of VE Day 1945 in Switzerland

In the year 2020, together with my much loved British compatriots, I took a break from coronavirus News, stood segregated in distance but close in grateful thoughts, for 2 minutes silent reflection, remembering our brave soldiers of yesteryears who liberated Europe. Afterwards, a friend, aware of my Swiss origin and my by now a bit senior age wanted to know how we, meaning in particular I, celebrated VE Day 1945 in Switzerland.

I was then a student, enrolled in a Diploma Course for Social Work run by Basel Stadt Authority and on VE Day 1945 on a placement for practical experience in, what would have then been called an Approved School for teenage boys up to the age of 18. This was a quite new crisis intervention establishment, run by a very experience Head and specially chosen staff for the 4 distinct departments, agricultural, garden, domestic and of course lessons in the 3 Rs. A regime friendly and understanding of teenage boys, but firm in trying to guide them away from their youthful misconceptions of their place in the world.

Plans for VE Day celebrations had been discussed by boys, staff and Head of establishment for some weeks. It was my job, at the time, to assist the Head of Kitchen supervise about 20 boys in charge of refreshments for an evening reception in a huge marquee to which the boys' parents and families were invited. I seem to remember helping with sandwiches, while the boys baked biscuits and, speciality of the day, jam filled doughnuts. Being exuberant and very mischievous cooks, the 'doughnutters' soon filled some doughnuts with a small onion in order to surprise their friends in the farming and gardening departments and generally get us all into the right 'end of conflict around Swiss frontiers' mood. Into the bubbling hot fat went the doughnuts: what the boys had not thought of was that, after cooking, the jam and onion doughnuts all looked the same. There was no time left. They had to be served.

It worked better than I and no doubt the boys expected. The Head, known by all as AETTI (father) and lover 'par excellence' of doughnuts was among the first to bite into an onion filled one. Without batting an eyelid he took the plate out of the shocked boy server's hand and made the rounds offering doughnuts to our guests. The boys' joy was complete; we were all ready to proceed into the next act, dancing to the accompaniment of a partly home, partly more professional, brass band from a nearby village.

Our Master Gardener turned out to be an excellent dancer looking for some innocent to show off his special craft, dancing a whole viennese valse with partner on top of a not much more than 1 meter diameter table. And his chosen partner? Social Work student Ruth, of course. How I had the nerve, nor even once lost my balance twirling round and round on such a small space, still fills me with wonder to this day when I have to rely heavily on my mountaineering stick just to keep upright. Also to this day I remember his firm hold of me and his change from right to left twirl to stop us getting giddy. Quite unforgettable throughout all my "twirls" in years to come.

Ruth