

Lesley Henderson

remembers those who helped to rebuild after the two World Wars

Some ordinary rebuilders

If you were born just months after the (Second) World War, your life was partly shaped by it. There was the gas mask and a big tin of cheese 'just in case' in the cellar, your mother jumping out of her skin whenever a mill siren went off, and wishing the buses at the terminus would turn off their engines because they reminded her of the bombers coming. You still never touched anything unusual on a beach in case it exploded; took air raid shelters in the Infants' School playground as normal, and proudly wrote 'Sweets came off the rashun today' in your (three times rubbed out, to save paper) school exercise book.

You heard too many stories to tell them all here. Your big brother had arrived the same week as the night raids on London; your Dad, in what some thought his 'cushy reserved occupation', firewatched on the roof of his London tax office after work, arranged the evacuation of his new son and our mother, and survived the bombing of his train on one of his few visits to see them. Grandma in Stirling used to send the family food, which sometimes went off on the post, and you were never to tell her that.

Others emerged from war not telling us, but showing us by how they lived, to value our fellow-people and our common humanity much more than any differences.

Uncle Fred, draftsman and artist: joined up under-age in WW1 'for the chance to ride a horse', though also to keep his big brother company; was gassed in the trenches, and survived; made a point of holidaying in Germany and hosting German exchange students; let us small relatives feel the grain and learn to see the craftsmanship of his much-loved Black Forest cuckoo clock, and had us try to imagine the maker.

Rudi Kohner, father of two of my schoolfriends - and what a violinist - barely a dozen years after his mother died in the gas chambers, raised the roof with an unforgettable Beethoven duet, along with Wolfgang, my brother's German exchange student, whose fault he knew none of it had been.

Wolfgang's mother, and ours, learning each other's languages, keeping in touch for the rest of their lives. Wouldn't they both have loved to know that the Balerno granddaughter of one of them would visit the family of the other, on a Lothian Schools Wind Band trip to Munich, and that the other's granddaughter would come from Munich to study at Heriot Watt?

From nearby Quakers, we learned of other kinds of bravery: lifelong believers that armed conflict was morally wrong, they had worked on farms during the war, and learned all about sticking to principles despite great unpopularity.

Along with them, Ukrainian, Latvian and Austrian neighbours, still raw from threats and experiences we couldn't even imagine, had the warmth and patience all the same to help prop up a young widow and her family with endless tea, Russian lessons from a fearsome primer with Lenin and Stalin on alternate pages, and shared carols at Christmas.

To all of these people, and to so many other unsung 'small' rebuilders whose lives and work brought and still bring hope of a better world, heartfelt thanks for helping us grow up. May we keep faith with your vision now.

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October 2018