

Bayswater and The New West End Synagogue during World War Two

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Part Three: The Day Of Atonement

Saturday 12 October 1940 / 10 Tishri 5701 and the Aftermath

Attacks continued on the East side of London, with the poorer communities stretched to the limits, but the Germans suddenly changed tactic, concentrating on the City and West End. Buckingham Palace bombed on the 13 September, and the day before a single 800 pound bomb landed in front of St Paul's Cathedral. If it had exploded, the whole facade would have been destroyed, twenty-six feet of tunnel to get to the bomb was dug, edged out, loaded on a lorry and detonated on Hackney Marshes.

Close to the New West End Synagogue 67 Bishops Bridge Road on the corner of Inverness Terrace sustained a direct hit, likewise 73, Kensington Gardens Square. Whilst a little further away 39 and 40 Ladbrooke Square severely damaged, incendiaries in Kensington High Street including John Barkers, with Holland House, Holland Walk virtually destroyed by fire.

Regular Sabbath services continued without interruption except for the 31 August 1940 when the warning sounded at 11.10am during the Reading of the Law. The congregation vacated to the shelter, with the 'All Clear' sounding soon after, the Service then resumed and completed. It was decided that service arrangements for the High Holydays would be the same as the previous year, first day New Year being the 3 October. The weather was poor on both days without any air activity, and up to the Day of Atonement on the 12 October, no serious damage occurred in the vicinity of the Synagogue. As it transpired, attendances were considered to be very good in the circumstances with 65 gentlemen and 50 lady members.

The service ended on the Day of Atonement at 6.30pm without the Shofar being sounded, because the Fast did not end until 7.03pm. Soon after the sirens, another raid was on its way, the distinctive drone of German aircraft getting nearer, the guns in Hyde Park opened fire seemingly overhead. Before the all clear at 9.30pm a high explosive bomb demolished 41 Bark Place and severely damaged the adjoining numbers 42, 43 and 44 on the corner of Orme Lane, where the Herbert Samuel Hall now stands. Look out of the left-hand window of the Beth Hamedrash and notice how near the rears of the houses in Bark Place are, stand for a moment and ponder! Then another huge explosion virtually destroyed 12 Orme Square, where the rear garden backed on to St Petersburg Place, now 9-11 Orme Lane.

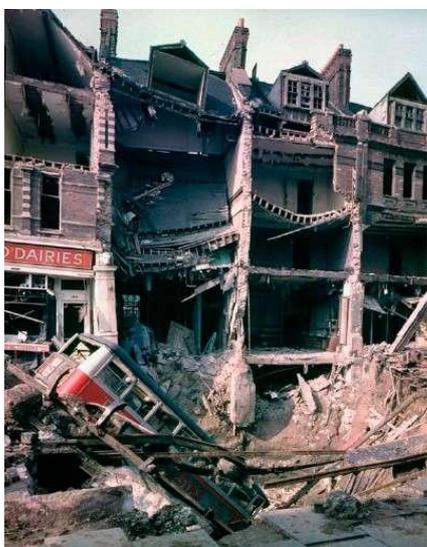


That Yom Kippur day, the 12 October 1940, our Synagogue was saved with blast damage to the stained glass in the east rose window, there were no casualties. On that same day, and unknown at the time, Germany shelved plans for the invasion of England.

Unfortunately no *Arba'a Minim* were available for Sukkoth that year but it was still celebrated within the limitations of any air raids and evening black-outs. On the 22 October, the third day of Chol Hamoed, by evening the fog had cleared and the sirens sounded, it started quietly. Then at 9.45pm Whiteleys Departmental Store took a direct hit on the southern bay, corner of Queensway and Porchester Gardens, penetrating five floors and exploding in the basement causing a collapse of the ground floor blast walls in the basement shelter, with an extensive fire due to ignition of a gas main. The All Clear sounded at 11pm but rescue work was delayed until daylight owing to water pumped in to quench the fire. Four days later, the last of the remaining casualties were extricated, the death toll fourteen, including a child and fireman.

There was now a lull in the heavy bombing on London with attacks in the Provinces, so much so, that a Board Meeting of The New West End Synagogue was held on the 14 November at 114, Old Broad Street in the City of London at the offices of Samuel Montagu by permission of Lord Swaythling who was in the Chair. Fittingly the Secretary reported that the Income to date was £5,386 compared with £5,660 in 1939 'a shrinkage of £274'. No comment was made, though in the circumstances it appears satisfactory, if only because they seemed more concerned with a member who had not fulfilled a promise to pay off arrears, being referred to Head Office. By request Reverend Levine had prepared a War Prayer for use in the Synagogue in place of the one issued by the Chief Rabbi which was adopted and a copy of the change made sent to the Chief Rabbi. The Board desired that the Services and the Sermons be continued after the sounding of the 'Alert', and approving the temporary closing of the Galleries and the provision of accommodation for lady worshippers in the body of the Synagogue. Six suitcases from the Welfare Committee of the United Synagogue for 'emergency use' of those rendered homeless through enemy action was reported. That same night the memorable attack on Coventry took place when the heart of the City was torn out leaving 500 dead and 1000 injured.

For myself there was a certain routine about it all - to school on the 27 buses where I was finding it increasingly difficult especially with homework, leaving school early seeing the queues to get down Notting Hill Gate Underground, roads roped off 'unexploded bomb', shop windows damaged with 'business as usual' signs. A kind of perpetual darkness the sirens sounding regularly at nightfall, knowing with a full moon we would 'cop it'. The guns, not only from Hyde Park, but also Wormwood Scrubbs, and the drone of German aircraft.



Feeling damp where we tried to sleep in the basement until in the end returning to our bedrooms upstairs resigned to our fate 'If your name is on the bomb - there is nothing you can do about it' Next day, out with my friends walking the streets for shrapnel from our guns, excited over finding a fuse ring and quite a number of incendiary fins - in the end Mother threw it all out! Then the rumours 'Did you hear that one in the night, an almighty bang! Where was it? Anyone killed?' and so on. I cannot say I was particularly scared except some bad nights; one of these was Saturday 8 March 1941 when we slept in the basement. I heard a fire party putting out an incendiary in our small front garden and then a stick of bombs in Chepstow Crescent and another in Westbourne Grove with some of our windows blown out. Our cat 'Bunny' got under the bed, Mother was now in an extremely nervous state and to comfort her Dad said 'Come on Lily it's all over

go and make a cup of tea'. Next night it was decided Mother and I would go down Notting Hill Gate Underground Station. Queued up with a couple of sleeping bags, flasks of tea and some biscuits, very crowded - not a pleasant experience - came out of the station at six in the morning half asleep. 'Geoffrey go ahead tell me if our house is still there - Yes Mum it is'

Thursday 17 April 1941 was another eventful night with 728 sorties flown by long range bombers, some making two trips over London. A Junkers 88 making the second trip had refuelled and rearmed from it's base in Jouvincourt, France at just past midnight, dropping two 500 pound bombs over the West End. Heading further west on the return flight was suddenly hit, possibly by the Hyde Park guns, and caught fire. Losing height towards Notting Hill Gate was heard making a louder and louder zoom zoom, the four man crew baled out. At 2.15am the aircraft came down on 5 and 6 Observatory Gardens, Camden Hill Road, off Kensington High Street, with wreckage strewn all over the road. Just fifteen minutes later the German parachutists were arrested in Brompton Road, South Kensington. Next day we boys heard the rumour and went hot foot to Camden Hill Road to see if we could get some parts of the aircraft. The road was roped off with an armed guard and we were told to clear off, but we had seen where the Hun had been downed with bits hanging in the trees.

Just an hour after the aircraft came down a Parachute Land Mine landed on the corner of Moscow Road, opposite the Greek Orthodox Church with a massive explosion. Pembrige Mansions in Moscow Road, a five story block of flats was completely destroyed with 12 people killed, including Emily Hirsch, Rosalie and Toya Singer. Also severely damaged were 1-6, Moscow Place and 1-5 Ilchester Gardens, all requiring demolition. Opposite, from the blast 55, 57, and 59 Moscow Road were demolished with the Tailors and Furriers Shop occupied by Max. Lewin & Co at 53, Moscow Road suffering severe structural damage, and subsequently also demolished. Parachute Land Mines was a devastating weapon with a ton of explosives and 9 feet in length, causing extensive blast damage. The east side of the Greek Church was affected and St Mathews Church suffered severe structural damage. The United Dairies building on the corner of St Petersburg Place and other properties in Moscow Road also had blast damage.

At nearly 5am, another Parachute Land Mine completely demolished or severely damaged twenty-four Private Hotels opposite Paddington Station at 30-52 Eastbourne Terrace. Platform One suffered a number of casualties in the refreshment room, with damage in the administrative block. This incident claimed the lives of twelve people.

After this severe raid I was evacuated again, this time with my mother renting a tiny house built for Morris Motor Car employees at Cowley Oxford, now repairing our damaged aircraft. My Mother was most unhappy with Dad left behind, and I can not say that during the time I was in Oxford the people were particularly welcoming to the London evacuees. After only two weeks, Mother returned to London, and I went to live with my Aunt and three cousins at Headington where I attended Oxford High School in George Street. A young man suddenly appeared who tried to teach me Hebrew and prepare for my Barmitzvah, which I found difficult.

Meantime at home 13, Palace Court was bombed on the 10 May 1941, also 4 and 14 Garway Road, killing one person, with the Post Office at 52 Westbourne Grove damaged from the blast. Possibly from the same stick of bombs, a high explosive fell on the cleared site of 41 and 42 Bark Place, blowing down protective rails from the previous occurrence

Divine preordination had saved us but not The Great Synagogue Dukes Place, that embodiment of Judaism for Anglo-Jewry, totally destroyed by fire the very next night 11 May 1941

For sources or a list of buildings bombed, contact the author or editor.

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