

From Austria to Saltaire and Bradford to Work in Textiles

Theresa Schistal (1931 – 2015)- A Vignette

Theresia was born in a small village called Mattersberg, just outside Vienna, Austria on the fifth of January 1931 and her baptismal name was given as Therisia. Her father, Johann was Hungarian and her mother Rosalia (Rosi) was Austrian. Theresa had three brothers and was born as the Nazi Party were coming to ascendancy in Germany, led by the Austrian born Adolf Hitler. (see app. 1 for a copy of Theresa's birth certificate)

Theresa experienced many political upheavals and changes in the lives of Austrian people as Nazism overtook the country of her birth – placing German troops in her country initially. Along with all young people in Austria and Germany Theresa was compelled to join the Hitler Youth Movement but frequently found relief from the pressures of dictatorship through spending time in the nearby forests and through her love of animals. The images below show Theresa as a young girl in Austria, dressed in her best and working with young animals.



As the war in Europe neared its end, Austria was over-run by Russian troops who, for a time, took control of her country through bloody fighting on the ground. After the fall of Stalingrad many atrocities were visited on German and Austrian citizens by Russian soldiers as they advanced on Berlin.

Theresa's son, Mark (b. Feb 6th 1960) recalls his mother's stories of some of the disturbing and uncertain times she lived through in her childhood and young adulthood. He recalls one of her stories, from the end of the war, when the Russians had invaded, where Theresa was so terrified of what the Russian soldiers may do to her that she hid from them under the dead bodies all around her.

Theresa also recalled that her mother Rosi had close Jewish friends and she had offered to take in the daughter of one of her friends and pretend that this girl was her own daughter in order to try to keep her safe. Very sadly however, the young Jewish woman lost her mind and killed herself and her daughter to escape the Jewish persecution that was by then widespread.

Amongst the many traumatic events she experienced was one that involved her brother Walter who was 'press ganged' to join the German Army. He escaped but was stopped and interrogated at a Russian checkpoint. They removed his boots and one of the Russian soldiers was told to take Walter into the nearby wood and shoot him. This soldier missed (deliberately) - and then told Walter to run just as fast as he could. Walter did and managed to escape and eventually walk the 60 kilometers to get home - barefoot. He told Mark that he would never forget that man's act of kindness.



An elite Mountain Infantry Cap that was a favorite memento of Theresa's.

Although Theresa had been granted Austrian citizenship on December 2 1946 (see app.2), as Austria began to emerge as a nation again, her experiences had been very traumatic and employment was difficult to find. She decided to seek work

as Gypsy because of her stunning looks) and her friends ruled the roost amongst the European girls and, for a time, tried to intimidate Theresa in front of the other girls. Theresa stood up to her and with one clout forced an end Gypsy's rule of terror within the group.



Theresa around 1949:



The Italian Woman known as Gypsy: 1952

Nevertheless, the young women were well looked after – albeit that the two ‘matrons’ in charge of the hostel were strictly in control of their lives. Mark recalls his mum reminiscing about that the two women employed to look after the young women in the hostel, who were apparently very strict and maintained a 9 pm curfew when all had to be in the residence. Many of the girls would creep out of the windows once the all clear was given!

They all availed themselves of the local amenities and some a little further afield. As the first image overleaf shows, the young women were smartly dressed and clearly enjoying Saltaire and its amenities – they pose near Saltaire boathouse at a

time when hiring a boat was still possible. They also enjoyed time in the sun at Bradford's Lido in what is now Lister park



Theresa also visited Paris in the 1950's and this indicates that, by then, she was earning a reasonably good wage. Theresa clearly enjoyed Paris. The photograph overleaf, showing her on the far right, in front of the Eiffel Tower indicates that some of her time there was spent in seeing the main tourist attractions.

Theresa's friends shown in the photographs of her in Paris are not known but the (left) photograph overleaf that shows her leading other girls on horseback indicates that she was enjoying life and had made friends. She was able to have fun due to her new found independence resulting from finding employment in the local Saltaire and Bradford textile industry. The relief from her stressful experiences in Austria during and after Nazi control will have been palpable – nevertheless she remained proud of her national origins throughout her life.



Initially Theresa was given employment in the spinning department at Salts Mill but she found the work to be technically difficult so was moved to the burling and mending department – work that she enjoyed. Here Theresa learned new skills and became a ‘passer’ – looking at the work of others and using chalk to circle any patches in the cloth that needed to be re-worked. She learned to pass the work to the most skilled women to correct these pieces. All the women called the pieces of cloth ‘pigs’ and eventually this work began to affect Theresa’s eyesight a little – particularly when working with mohair – a very fine cloth difficult to work with and requiring keen eyesight and strong nerves.



The Burling and Mending Department: Salts Mill – decorated for a celebration

Whilst Theresa lived in Saltaire she met and married Ronald Mortimer at a local dance. Ronald was born on 21 January 1928 at North Bierley. His Mother's maiden name was Stringer and his father was a worsted spinner. He died on the 24 October 1986. Ronald Mortimer worked at International Harvesters, which was a major employer in the Shipley Area, as a planning engineer. Mark recalls, the story that his dad had asked to meet Theresa at the Ring of Bells public house in Shipley, after the dance. Theresa was due to go to a job interview in Leeds that day that would have been a complete change of direction for her - the position was as the glamorous girl in the circus that had knives thrown at her! She decided instead to meet Ronald and their relationship became a permanent one.



They were married at Bradford Registry Office on 10 October 1959. Mark, their first and only son was born shortly after the wedding. (see app. 6)

During the 1960's Theresa's husband Ronald was working all over the world for International Harvesters – spending time in the USA, Germany and Turkey. Ronald and Theresa had their son Mark in 1960 and the family moved to Naseby Street in Listerhills, Bradford, where Mark attended Princeville Primary School. He recalls suffering some abuse from the head teacher at the school because she thought his mother was a 'Nazi, German' but Mark was unable to tell anyone about this at the time.

Mark is sure that his mother had faced similar prejudice during her early life in Britain. Theresa continued to work in textiles for many years, moving to Star Mills, Longside Lane, Listerhills, Bradford, initially. Mark recalls his mum taking him to work with her many times and particularly remembers the deafening clatter and noise of the machinery. The family moved to live near the City centre on Manchester Road in the early 1970's and then to Little Horton Green in the early 1980s where Theresa lived until she died at 85 years of age.

Throughout her time in Bradford, Theresa remained proud of her Austrian citizenship and as late as 17 July 1962 there is a document confirming her Austrian Citizenship from the Austrian Embassy in London. (see app. 4) A later document from the Embassy informs Theresa that she must renew her Austrian Passport every 10 years (app. 5). It appears that Theresa was happy to remain Austrian and Mark recalls many visits to her family in Austria when he was a child – especially the horrendously long train journey. He still recalls his grandfather chasing him around the garden with his Luger pistol.

By 1957 Theresa had started work at Star Mills, Longside Lane, Bradford and a reference given for her in 1975 notes her eighteen years of ‘first class’ service as a ‘woollen and worsted mender’, her happy and cheerful disposition and her excellent time-keeping. It regrets that the lack of orders in the textile trade have led to her redundancy. (app. 7)

Theresa also worked for a period for William Halstead and Co., Weavers of Stanley Mills, Dudley Hill Bradford but again being made redundant due to lack of orders (app 8). The decline of Bradford’s textile industry led Theresa – by then a widow – taking cleaning work and for many years she was a cleaner at City Hall in Bradford, becoming a well known and loved character there also.



Theresa Mortimer (Schistal) – visiting Bradford Industrial Museum (circa 1990)