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A Lost Orange

*The story of a detainee from the only
British territory the Nazis occupied*

Noah Abrahams

Recently, I met a 91-year-old woman with a special story.

She taught me about one of the least-known chapters of the Second World War. Our conversation was a reminder of how very close civilization came to an ultimate defeat. How great is humanity's debt to my homeland that, for a while, stood alone in the face of evil. And how sad it is when those who pay heavier prices than others in war do not see their sacrifices recognized.

On May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill took office as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. A month later, on June 14, 1940, Paris fell to the Nazis.

Consequently, on June 19, 1940, the British government withdrew all military personnel from the Channel Islands, an archipelago in the English Channel divided into two British Crown dependencies, the Bailiwicks of Guernsey and Jersey. Between June 19 and 23, 1940, approximately 17,000 of Guernsey's 42,000 inhabitants, mostly mothers and children, were evacuated to England.

The rest were left behind.

The decision to demilitarize the islands was made because Churchill saw them as militarily indefensible and strategically unimportant. The British government even announced publicly that no resistance would be offered if the Nazis made the decision to occupy.

Contrary to popular belief, Churchill never offered an apology for that decision, but did praise the islanders' "fortitude" in a 1945 parliamentary speech.

On June 28, 1940, the Nazis, possibly not convinced that the islands had been demilitarized, used bombers to attack the Guernsey and Jersey airfields. The air raids killed 33 people and injured dozens more.

Eventually, after conducting a reconnaissance flight and realizing that there were no British defenses, the Nazis landed unopposed. Jersey was occupied on June 29, and Alderney and Sark fell on July 2.

The islands remained the only British territories invaded by the Nazis during the Second World War.

Experts suggest that only 10 of the 2,300 British civilian residents who were deported by the Nazis to internment camps in Germany and France in 1942 are still alive today.

One of them is Jill Oliver, the daughter of the only dentist on Guernsey, who lives today in San Diego, California.

First came the Nazi occupation. Oliver recalled that her family had no choice but "to be nice" to the Nazis who took over her home when she was six years old.

"My mother acted very nice to them. The Nazis informed her that they would take over our house with no room for negotiations. My dad had a house in the forest. He also had a small apartment in St. Peter Port [the capital and the main port of Guernsey], and we shipped there. My mother even put flowers in the house for the Germans," she recalled.

Hitler's order of detainment from September 1942 stated that: "All male British subjects of military age and all British citizens not native to the Channel Islands shall be interned in Germany."

Oliver was not a Jew, her father was not a soldier, and, crucially, she was born in Guernsey. While she did not fit any of Hitler's criteria, her father was born in England. The Nazis, who had already occupied Guernsey for over two years, deported entire families together. She ended up on the deportation list.

Historians wondered why Hitler wasted resources on deporting the Channel Islanders. Despite some acts of defiance, including the hiding of several Jews, they did not pose a real threat to the Nazi occupation.

One possible explanation is that after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Persia (modern-day Iran) in 1941, where British and Soviet troops interned German civilian residents,

Hitler wanted revenge. Another is that because the Nazis invested heavily in building fortifications on all of the Channel Islands, they wanted to reduce the burden on local resources. Additionally, the deportations served as a terror tactic to ensure defiance does not become more widespread.

“After a certain period of time, we were told that we had to ship out to Germany,” Oliver reminisces. “The stench when we travelled across the English Channel was horrible. Everybody got sick because the Channel was so rough. I don’t know how they cleaned those boats afterwards

“I still don’t know why the Nazis did this to us when they couldn’t even afford to feed us. I remember eating cabbage leaf soup, and I loved it. Yet I also remember going to bed hungry. I was a child. We had cold-water showers, and we were left to our own devices.

“We were sent to two camps. The first was Dorsten [Stalag VI-J], a large prisoner of war camp located on the western rim of the Rhineland], which was flea-infested, with 18 people placed in a room designed for eight people. My brother and I were very fragile and shared a bed. We were not treated very well, and it was very unhealthy. We slept on straw mattresses in a sack. We were not kept there for very long, fortunately.

“Then the Nazis moved us to Biberach [camp] on a train. It took us three days to go from Dorsten to Biberach, which is south of the Black Forest.

“Biberach was our home for three years, and everyone tried to make a go of it. I don’t know what we would have done without the Red Cross parcels. The British sent us books, and I had three. One of the stories was about a family taking a vacation, and I didn’t understand what vacations were.

“I really thought that being in the camp was normal and the way to live. I was in the camp from eight to 11 years old. We made purses and hats from the string on the Red Cross parcels. Families would get their own personalized parcels, and some would even have cigarettes and toys. Everyone got a can of corned beef and spam. I still love both of those today.”

Initially, Oliver expected their detainment to be temporary. “We never thought we would stay there for three years,” she laments.

Eight decades later, the anger and disappointment are still with her.

“We didn’t even think we would stay there for one Christmas. But we did and we had two Christmases there.

“I feel that my country abandoned me. I think Churchill was a weak but brilliant man. He wouldn’t have been able to do what he did [win the war] without the Americans. I fly my American flag with pride.

“It really upsets me that the [wartime] cannons and tanks on the islands are still there today. I think we should get rid of those. Who wants to remember that?”

“My dad used to leave the camps to do dentistry in Biberach. There was another dentist who went with him, and he was from Jersey. Sometimes he would manage to bring back an egg. After the war, we never spoke about our experiences.”

On April 22, 1945, French Moroccan tanks entered Biberach and fought against German forces who had established strong posts in farms and houses west of the camp. A battle ensued, and all the German posts were destroyed. The camp was hit by a stray shell that subsequently struck the Red Cross parcels hut and set it on fire. No one was injured.

The battle lasted a day.

When it was over, the German camp commandant and the British camp captain, Garfield Garland, arranged to send a German civilian to the Allies to tell them about the existence of the detainment camp.

Those in the camp covered Nazi flags with white sheets and painted on them the red cross of St George. The flags were flown at prominent points around the camp so that the advancing Allies could spot them.

Once in control, the French army recorded the names of the detainees inside the camp and helped organize their repatriation through Switzerland and France. The process, however, was painfully slow, and Oliver was not allowed to return to Britain until 1946.

“My maiden name is Pay, and they sent us home in alphabetical order. They could only send so many planes to take us back to England.

“Eventually, we were back on the island. Our yacht had been looted. It had nothing in it, and even the head had been taken out. All of our possessions had been stolen. My dad’s car was stolen. All of his dental equipment was stolen, too.

“My grandmother lived in the apartment above the dental office. She was still alive when we arrived home, and she explained that whilst they were really not disturbed by the Germans, who all kept to themselves, they were having a hard time with food.”

After the war, Oliver moved with her family to Devonshire in England, where she began a new life. Her father worked as an associate dentist at a friend’s surgery, and Oliver was sent to boarding school.

“It was unbelievable. I never thought you could go out to earn money or go out to eat lunch,” she related.

“I absolutely hated boarding school. I felt like I was still in the detainment camp. I went to a school in Sidmouth, Devon. It was run by three spinsters. I was there for four horrible years and I hated it as much as I hated the camps.

“They knew about my background, and my mother tried to tell them that I needed to be taught how to cook. The school was cold, damp, and dark. I educated myself later in life when I moved to the United States.”

Whilst in Devonshire, Oliver met her husband and they had two children in England, before crossing the Atlantic and having a third. She told me she “is not particularly bothered” about her legacy, yet her message to young people is: “Educate yourself as much as you can and be happy because this life is too short.”

In 2022, with her help and input, California-based author David K. Treadway wrote the book *One Orange for Christmas* (independently published). The historical fiction is based on Oliver’s life and the wish she expressed as a child in Camp Biberach to receive an orange as a Christmas gift.

The Second World War saw far greater calamities than those of the Channel Islanders’ detainment days. Still, Oliver’s painful childhood stories, which the missing orange represents, are part of the tragic history of the war, and I felt humbled when we peeled them together.

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