

Second World War Family History

by Christine Aspinall

Here is the story of my parents' stressful departure from France at the time the second world war was declared in September of 1939.

"My parents were in Nice, France when war was declared in September, 1939. They returned to England because of the threat of German invasion, plus the fact that when war was declared France immediately rationed food. My parents and my paternal grandmother traveled to Liverpool on the Cunard White Star liner 'Athenia.' The 'Athenia' returned to France and was immediately dispatched back to England with a ship full of children whose parents were sending them to England for 'safekeeping.'

In the channel, the 'Athenia' was torpedoed by a German submarine. Luckily, there were allied ships in the vicinity that were able to rescue the children. The captain of the submarine was, apparently, severely chastised by the German high command, for it was a rule of war that no ship carrying civilians could be targeted. My parents stuck it out in England until the fall of 1940 when they left Southampton for Montreal. They might have stayed throughout the war, but because of the imminent threat of the invasion of England, all financial transactions from Canada to England were stopped and therefore my parents had no option but to leave. My dad at that time had a small electrical appliance business in Montreal.

From what I was told, it was a scary departure, as there were German subs in the area. The first night out from Southampton, England, all passengers had to remain on deck for easy abandonment of the ship if attacked. No one was allowed any kind of light at all and definitely, no cigarettes. We were escorted by a convoy. This was my first trip to Canada. I was born in London early in 1939. I was an infant at the time and had to be held by my parents and my grandmother, taking turns on deck during those first dangerous couple of nights. According to my mother, it was a nerve wracking voyage, but luckily we arrived in Montreal unscathed. We were very lucky!

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