

An Island In The Stream
or
One Man's War:
The Wartime Diary of Percy Jacobson, 1939 - 1945

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Smithsonian National Postal Museum
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In Ken Burns' documentary, *The War*, we are introduced to Al McIntosh, reporter with the *Rock Country Star Herald*, in Luverne, Minnesota. The compelling voice of Tom Hanks, reads excerpts from his articles which tell a story of how the Second World War was lived on the home-front in a rural community.

I have found a voice which similarly speaks to the war as lived on the home-front. It belonged to Percy Jacobson a native of Westmount, an affluent suburb of Montréal, Canada. He kept a diary through the war from September 1939 to May and August of 1945. I have gone through it and have come up with three narrative threads: the story of Percy and his family household; the long-distance relationship between father and son (Joe), who served overseas in the Royal Canadian Air Force; and third, the larger perspective of the Montréal home front. The diary is informative, the tone spirited, the subject matter, engaging. He is talking about my home town. Westmount is and has been for a century, a bourgeois enclave, blessed with an arrangement of class and wealth that more or less follows the city's three-tiered natural topography; the executive summit on top of the mountain, the upper and middle class slopes and the lower plateau. The Jacobson's lived at 635 Grosvenor Avenue in the second zone, where the slope angles up toward the crest of Westmount Mountain.

Section One: Percy and Family

Originally the Jacobson's were a family of six: Percy and May, and their four children: Edith, Peter, Janet and Joe. The number was paired down to five in 1938 when Peter, aged 16 died of a blood disease, and ultimately four after the loss of Joe overseas in the

winter of 1942. Percy was born in England in 1886, skinny, all of 140 pounds, clean-shaven, he wears an old soft felt hat which makes him look like a gangster.¹ He likes tobacco: He burnt a hole in his chair with his damn pipe,² but later gave it up for cigarette smoking. Cigarettes truly suited the times, he felt, with its allure of “high nervous tension, changing moods....sensation of being in transition stage...not permanent...quickly ended.”³ ((



The Jacobson's do not have a car. Percy takes the tramway to work. The tram to downtown runs half a block away. Fortunately he was not on board when it jumped the tracks causing one fatality just before Christmas in 1942, two streets over.⁴ Work, is the Office Equipment Company, where Percy is V.P. His hours are from 9 to 5. Percy shows up regularly for work, but is not interested in his job, except for the mail. His real passion is reading and writing. He wrote three radio plays during the war all of which were aired on the CBC. He read non-fiction - Laski, William Shirer and Lippman – and fiction Steinbeck, Llewellyn, Hugh McLennan. McLennan, the author of the noted Canadian best-seller *Two Solitudes*, was a good friend. He and Percy were active on Montreal's English-language literary scene.

¹ Archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Diary of Percy Jacobson, 16 April 1943.

² Diary of Percy Jacobson, 21 November 1939.

³ Ibid. 15 Feb 1941

⁴ Jacques Pharand, *À la belle époque des tramways. Un voyage nostalgique dans le passé*, Montréal, Editions de L'homme : p. 210.

Percy did not enjoy shopping. He much preferred to wander around in a park and catch up with his thoughts. On one occasion he did agreed to go out with his wife, but got only as far as the grocery store before he escaped. May ran into some friends, and he slipped away; he just hated to carry parcels. One wonders if May didn't hate carrying them too, all alone. Percy and May were very close. He never thinks of writing about her, "she is simply me." Although he never forgets her birthday (May 20th. In 1941 she gave up the bookshop she had been running for ten years and by the fall had a full-time position overseeing English evacuees in Montréal.⁵ May was not a stay-at-home mom.

The family had a maid. It is not clear what happened to her on those quiet family evenings, when: "we are altogether in the family living room, listening to Brahms Third Symphony. May knitting." Quietude, although celebrated in the diary is not the rule of thumb. Their home was a lively place, anything but static. Daughter Edith, married in 1942, returned home to give birth to a baby girl in August of 1943. The house was so full that Percy had to change his trousers out in the hall, to the amusement of the nurse. People they barely knew came for supper or the night, *en passant*. Among them an American newspaper correspondent, an English friend from Bermuda. Daughter Janet's American boyfriend, traveled 500 miles just to see her, late in the summer of 1944. Ricky the blond-haired airman from Vancouver came to stay in May of 1944. He left a note: "...thank you again for a swell weekend. I was never treated so nice in my life..."⁶ Sargent Pilot Coates ferried planes from nearby factories to the air force base outside of Montréal (Saint-Hubert). He was a real hit with the girls at Jacobson's; he was all of 19 with a alluring baby face.

⁵ Diary of Percy Jacobson, 17 September 1941.

⁶ Diary of Percy Jacobson 21 May 1944.

For Pure Enjoyment

● Whenever good friends drop in for an old-fashioned get-together, offer them the welcome of five generations—Black Horse—Canada's Finest Ale . . . the ale that made the DAWES BREWERY famous throughout the world. Each mellow drop reflects true hospitality. Hold up a glassful—you can see the difference. Take a sip. Yes, it has a flavour all its own. And, with a potluck supper, there's nothing like it. For Black Horse aids digestion, too. What's more, you'll find your friends prefer it—for pure enjoyment.

Canada's Finest Ale
Black Horse
 A favourite for five generations

For Pure enjoyment, Black Horse Ale

All told, 18 people of seven different nationalities sat down at their table for Seder on April 20th 1943: Czechs, Belgians, Russians, Germans, Englanders, Canadians and Americans. A German-born university student stayed with them for two years but they could accommodate more guests. In March of 1945 acting on a request from Edith in Grandby, they agreed to care for a pregnant woman just before she was due to give birth; her husband was overseas.

In July 1940 two young English evacuees Lilian and Yvette Kostoris, aged 15 and 13, moved in. The daughters of English friends they lived with them until 1942. They returned home safely in December 1942, although the ship carrying their luggage was later torpedoed. Lilian sent a 15-page letter to Percy and May in which she stated that she was counting the days when she would return to Canada.⁷ She eventually got her wish.

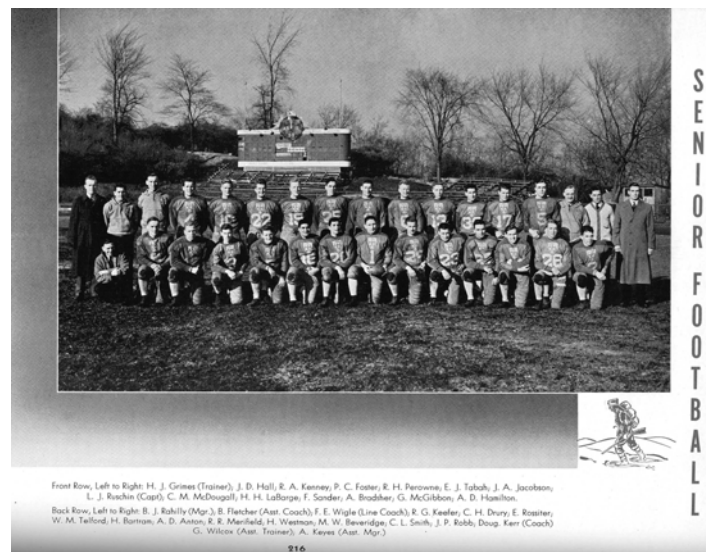
⁷ Ibid 8 May 1943.

Overseas she met and married a Montreal-born airman, and acquaintance of the Jacobson's, Harry Shapiro.⁸

The revolving door of the Jacobson family home was ever welcoming newcomers, friends and friends of friends. The result was a busy kitchen and considerable long distance communication. The mailbag brought news from points far and wide and especially from Joe.

Joe

All-Canadian athlete, an accomplished hockey and football player, Joe Jacobson was born in 1919. After attending Westmount High School he earned a B. Com from McGill, graduating in 1939. He played on the McGill team which won the (Canadian) university football championship in 1938. War broke out in September of 1939. The entire team enlisted.⁹ Seven never returned, including Joe.



Senior Football Team 1938

Joe did not join up immediately. He took a job at a furniture factory, in Preston, Ontario, where he stayed until the spring of 1940. His letters home were humorous, jolly, amusing, cheerful, funny, refreshing and lively. Throughout this period Joe thought often

⁸ *Canadian Jews in World War II: Part I Decorations*, Montréal, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1947: p. 26.

⁹ Tom Hawthorn, « Never to be Forgotten », *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 11 November 2004.

of going to war, he was interested first in the navy, but later leaned toward the air force. By the end of June, 1940 he was in the RCAF.

Joe's training took him to Toronto and later Regina and Mossbank, Saskatchewan. The letters from Toronto are "intimate and interesting", already Percy senses a change, Joe has become a fighting man. Early in the New Year Joe, "is quite mad over night bombing".¹⁰ The training in Western Canada broadened Joe's horizons, "he has learned more about Canadian geography than all the years spent in school"; he was developing a sense of pride in his country.¹¹ In January Joe sent a remarkable letter, for Dad only, in which he demonstrated a strong grasp of family affairs.¹² He was growing up, right proper, right fast.



Dear Diary Today Bob Got His Wings

The letters were much appreciated at 635 Grosvenor as were the long-distance phone calls; the one from Regina October 31st only cost three dollars and it was so comforting to hear Joe's voice. Joe arrived home in February, of 1941 on his last leave. He went skiing,

¹⁰ Diary of Percy Jacobson: 5 January 1941.

¹¹ Ibid. 14 December 1940.

¹² Diary of Percy Jacobson 11 January 1941.

and traveled to Québec city, presumably to celebrate the *mardi gras*. Father and son were not forthcoming in their exchanges: "...too serious... too much is at stake."¹³

Percy accompanied Joe to the station, jam-packed with 1000 airmen. Two weeks later he called from Nova Scotia. Father and son were tongue-tied, "queer how much we wanted to say to each other and how little we could say".¹⁴ Finally one month later a cable announced Joe's safe arrival in Britain. He sent five more cables until the letters started arriving on the 18th of June.



Joe in Uniform

Joe was never out of touch for long. The space between letters and cables was usually 10 days or less. The initial delay was caused by the constant bombing of Britain which crippled the mails. The letters were cheery as before, but also frank: The British fighting

¹³ Ibid. 8 March 1941.

¹⁴ Ibid. 5 April 1941.

spirit declined in the aftermath of Dunkirk, the old brass hats were to blame..¹⁵ A few days later he commends the British for their courage. Joe sent home some theatre programs advising the public that although there was an air raid shelter nearby, “in any case the show would continue and those in the audience who wished to remain seated could do so”.¹⁶

By the fall of 1941 Joe was bombing Germany every second night. He marked his bombs with the names of each member of his family; the large devices for his parents, the smaller ones for his siblings. Joe was fully aware that he was treading a fine line: he told his father, “that the fact that he is in constant danger of losing his life seems to accentuate the value of his life to himself.”



Sorting Mail for the RCAF

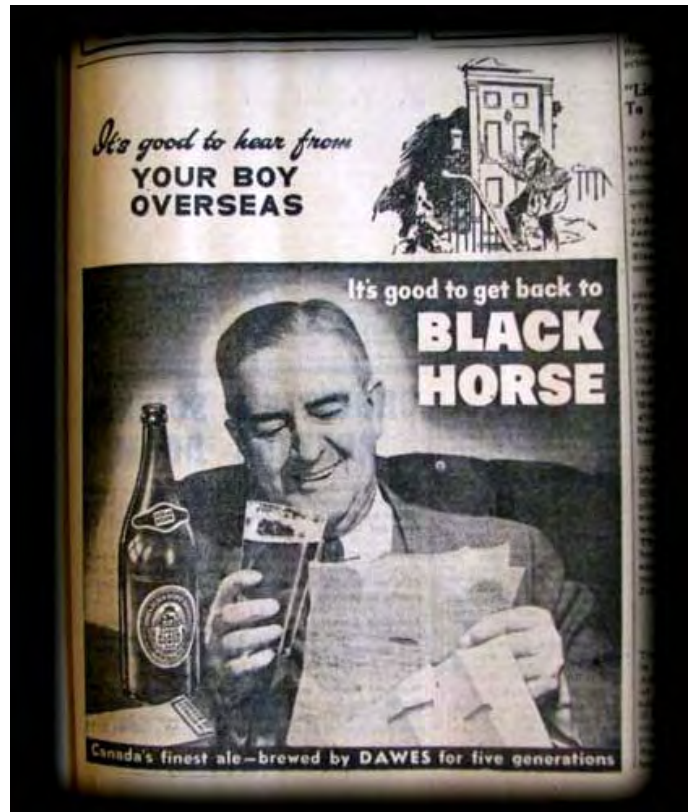
Letters and cables kept arriving, sometimes on the same day. One referred to the weakness in air force leadership. The Aussies, Kiwis and Canadians accounted for three-quarters of the men serving in the RAF and yet none of these countries was represented in the high command.¹⁷ The critical tone came as a surprise to the Jacobson's. They expected that this kind of thing would never pass the censor. A few months later they

¹⁵ Ibid. 18 June 1941.

¹⁶ Ibid. 23 September 1941.

¹⁷ Ibid. 8 December 1941.

learned from another Canadian airman that not all letters made it through: the files of the RCAF in London were allegedly full of letters withdrawn from circulation.¹⁸



It's good to get back to Black Horse Reading mail

Late in December (1941) Jacobson received a fine letter from Joe, one of his best. “This relationship between Joe and me is one of the finest things in my life.... Evidently my letters to him have the same heartwarming effect...”¹⁹ The next day he wrote a long reply, “never thought I would be able to write so intimately to my own son”. A month later Joe sent a cable to his parents marking their anniversary. That was the last they heard from him.

January 28th (1942) Joe’s plane was shot down. A few days later, Percy, on holiday in the Laurentians received a call from his daughter Edith who read over the phone the contents of the telegram announcing Joe’s disappearance. Both daughters were summoned up

¹⁸ Ibid. 29 March 1942.

¹⁹ Ibid. 27 December 1941.

north for the rest of the weekend. Percy and May stayed until the following Thursday. This allowed them to avoid hundreds of phone calls, for Joe's disappearance was in the papers.²⁰ When Percy and May returned hundreds of letters awaited them. The family's hopes that Joe had somehow survived were dashed when the news confirming his death arrived by cable February 22nd. In March their letters to Joe were returned. The parents discovered his childhood diary and started reading through it. Joe's buddies in the RCAF sent encouraging messages and visited while in town. The wife of an airman who was lost over Germany wrote to the Jacobson's in April; this kind of postal commiseration was likely fostered by the military.²¹



Where's Joe: Provocation

The Jacobson's were not alone. The brother of Dr Usher, a good friend of their's was reported missing and then listed killed in April 1942. Percy saw one of the airman's last letters. "Heartbreaking". The pages of the local paper, the *Westmount Examiner*, were replete with notices of RCAF personnel, former Westmount residents, gone missing, or

²⁰ Both the Montreal Gazette and the Montreal Star carried a report on his disappearance on 2 February, 1942. Strangely I was not able to find any information on this in the Westmount Examiner. Clippings from the Star and Gazette are available in the McGill University War Records.

²¹ Jacobson Diary 22 April 1942.

presumed dead. I counted four in the January 1942 edition of the paper. In April 1942 the O'Neill's, who lived down the street from the Jacobson's, lost their son, a pilot officer.²² Perhaps the Jacobson's and the O'Neill's ran into one another while grocery shopping, during which time they could exchange condolences.

The Home Front

Too old to fight, Percy served as a district warden in the Civilian Protection Corps. He was trained to assist firefighters and civil defense authorities in the event of an air raid. In case of German attack his job was to direct victims to nearby first-aid shelters. He had charge of 33 homes. Black out exercises were held in 1941, during which, said Percy, everyone spoke in a hushed voice.



Don't let them down: somber looks

People were nervous, the atmosphere was somber June 18 1940: "Men here in street cars...I see them...look worried faces are long. There is little gayety...There is an ominous feeling of worse to come." Unpleasant attitudes bubbled to the surface. Percy referred to this nasty exchange at the University Club. An American sitting next to him began criticizing Roosevelt; the tone escalated with assertions that the Jews were Roosevelt's accomplices; America had to rid herself of her Jews. Percy let him go on but upon finishing his lunch he got up, bid the man good day and told him, "by the way I am

²² Westmount Public Library: Reference Room: *Westmount Examiner* 16 April 1942.

a Jew.” “His face was a study. He sputtered yes but you are the kind of Jew my physician is.” Percy said “you are wrong we are all the same” and walked away.²³

The popular temper was on edge. September 5 1944, Percy records that they were awoken by an earthquake after midnight. Down in Verdun, a frightened woman was found kneeling outdoors with her two children, shrieking that enemy planes were bombing the city.²⁴ One can imagine the anxiety of Montrealers when a giant (allied) military aircraft accidentally crashed into a working class district of the city leaving 15 dead in 1944.²⁵ The specter of Germans U-boats and the Luftwaffe put the fear of God into Canadians. My question is this: how did everyone deal with the psychological burden.

Carry on: As if

One option was to ignore it all. While traveling to Ottawa by train Percy overheard a group of businessmen discussing real estate and golf, while they headed to a posh retreat, as if there was no war.²⁶ Business as usual infuriated Percy. He detected insouciance even within his own family. He drew striking comparisons between home and war:

Friday night May 17, 1940:

- Brussels fell to Germans, daughter Edith in a tantrum, had to stay home because of a cold
- "Supposedly impregnable French defenses have been pierced by the enemy and our sales of fine office furniture are the best in our history."
- "Hordes of Nazis preparing to attack England, and we are going out to dinner and afterwards to a movie"
- Millions of Jews fleeing from Germans, "and I am writing ...to Charlie Rittenhouse wishing him success in his Summer Theatre project."

²³ Jacobson Diary, 6 June 1944.

²⁴ S. Durflinger *Fighting From Home* : p.86.

²⁵ Jacobson Diary 26 April 1944. See also The report in the *Globe and Mail* 26 April 1944, front page

²⁶ Jacobson Diary 22 August 1942.

How did Percy keep his sanity intact? A partial answer: he and other Canadians gorged off media and popular entertainment. One Friday in 1939 he wonders what to do on the weekend: go to a movie, or listen to jazz over the radio interspersed with news broadcasts. He certainly reserved a portion of his time for the newspapers. But he just had to turn that dial. September 4: 1939: "I made the vow that I would not keep my ear glued to radio, but I could not resist listening in on broadcasts." Two days later, "A news broadcaster a moment ago stated that from a point in Switzerland close to the German border, French and German soldiers could be heard hurling insults at each other but not a shot was fired." May 12 1940 he tunes in to reports of the Nazi invasion of Holland and Belgium. D-Day June 6 1944, at 8 a.m.: "In a quiet unemotional voice the announcer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation told us the invasion of Europe had begun."

Percy listens to Churchill and the King's annual Christmas message. Roosevelt's voice in 1941 was that of a sick man. Four year later, in a radio address to the nation, the voice is quiet, unemotional, but deadly earnest, for victory is in sight.²⁷ Following the death of FDR, on April 13th, the stations in Montréal dispensed with the usual cheap fare and aired a series of dignified and solemn broadcasts. Radio is a feast for the mind and the senses. It allows Percy to listen to the gorgeous finale of Othello on the afternoon broadcasts from the Met, as well as the cheaper themes of popular culture. A new song was playing by late December 1941, called "Remember Pearl Harbor"; the event was not a month old and already it had a history. When not satisfied with the radio, Percy could always listen to his own music. Early in January 1941 he purchased a brand new radio-gramophone. The record player was used more frequently than the radio.²⁸

The Jacobson's liked to go out as did many other Montrealers: 6,000 went to an outdoor concert on the Mountain in July 1942; the same number listened to Beethoven's Fifth at the Montreal Forum in 1943. July 1944, Percy was still spellbound while walking home following an evening concert atop Mount Royal which attracted a crowd of 5,000 people,

²⁷ Jacobson Diary : entries for 7 January 1945; 28 May 1941.

²⁸ Jacobson Diary : entries for 24 April 1944, 11 January 1941

“the very rare sensation of a glimpse of beauty”. During the war concerts were attended en masse; each an oasis, a collective shelter from the storm.

Percy was an avid movie-goer, in one sitting he watched four films. The diary tells us what he went to see: A Marx Brothers film which gave him a good belly-laugh; a few classics : Gone with the wind (1940), Citizen Kane (1941) The Happy Breed (1945). Some of the flicks attended, came with evocative titles: For Whom We Serve, (1943), Mission to Moscow (1943), Five Graves to Cairo (1943). Percy went to see a picture featuring a well-known crooner, “who is said to make girls swoon in ecstasy by the tone of his voice”. Alas the women in attendance were not swayed by Sinatra.²⁹ I am not sure if he saw The Master Race: Beware of the Beaten Germans, or Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo, or They Came to Blow Up America, and the blockbuster, Dangerous Blonds. All of these films were playing in a nearby theatre in 1944-45. There were movies for every mood. Canadians were amused or enthralled as were their neighbors to the south.



A Yank in the RAF

²⁹ Jacobson Diary 27 March 1944. The film he saw may have been The Road to Victory.



The Master Race: Beware the Beaten Germans



Dangerous Blondes

Final Remarks

By the spring of 1945 the war was winding down, everyone waited for the big news. V-E day was officially proclaimed on the 8th of May but the streets of Montréal were already full on the 7th as soon as news of the surrender reached the city. Percy sent flowers to his wife. The office closed at noon, he walked home with mixed feelings watching the celebrations. There were a few returned soldiers, some elderly or middle-aged people, but the majority consisted of youngsters of the teen age.

Another source indicates that on that day, students from Westmount High, deserted their classrooms and headed east into downtown Montréal.³⁰ Waving a huge Union Jack, they barged through the doors of Montreal High School to give them the good news. Now larger the parade marched down to Central Station, and blended into the growing throng of office workers. By five in the evening St. Catherine Street was a single mass of people for several kilometers. Percy was not there. The streets belonged to a new generation which, despite the gaping holes in its ranks, for so many never returned, would shortly make the world its own.

We can well understand Percy's qualified joy. Five and a half years is a long time to have your nerves strung out on the line. The loss of a son, was not a pain that could be swept under the rug still less forgotten. We are one or two generations removed from these events. Yet I think we can make these words our own. Percy wrote them down in January 1941, they are from Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley*:

“But you have gone now, all of you that were so beautiful when you were quick with life. Yet not gone, for you are still a living truth inside my mind. So how are you dead, my brothers and sisters and all of you, when you live with me as surely as I live with myself.”

³⁰ See column “Westmount High Lights” by George Cochrane in *Westmount Examiner* 11 May 1945.