Published in *The Write Place at the Write Time:* Autumn/Winter 2017

Flying History

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I never flew in an airplane until I was almost thirty years old. In England in the 50's and early 60's, air travel was expensive and uncommon: no one did it. We traveled by train or car—or boat if crossing the sea to the Continent. When cheaper, charter flights came on the scene in the late 1960's, my parents didn't approve. They considered them unsafe. At the age of fourteen, I was invited to go with some cousins to Greece, but it involved flying on a charter—and my parents refused to give permission.

In their later years, both my parents became accustomed to flying. My father traveled to South America and Mexico for research; my mother took herself off on jaunts to Iceland and St. Petersburg. They both visited me after I made my home in California. And when my parents were ailing in their eighties, I made the trip across the pond several times a year. I accumulated frequent flyer miles and now, somehow, I have acquired TSA Pre√ status. I jump on flights as if I were hopping on a bus.

Well, not quite. I do it, but I still don't really understand how it works. How does this huge monster lift up into the sky and travel at such speed high above the ocean? How do those massive wings keep the plane aloft? I always choose a window seat and keep a vigilant eye on takeoff and landing, as if it couldn't manage without me: I have to watch, and will everything to go smoothly, and stroke the magic crystal I keep in my pocket. And the sheer volume of people criss-crossing the globe at any one time; it all seems so improbable.

Once, my mother mentioned the first time she flew—in a very different era. I knew the background story: she was a young woman stuck in Paris in 1940, only a few weeks before the Nazi invasion. And she was Jewish, originally from Czechoslovakia, trying to get a visa to enter Britain. She had friends from Prague who had reached England one way or another, but she was denied multiple times. She eventually made it out—just in time. I grew up knowing this in outline, but she never discussed the details. Most of the family she left behind perished in the Holocaust, and like so many who survived, she never dwelt openly on the emotional impact.

But when I was in my thirties, I wanted to learn more, and on one occasion she agreed to record an oral history. I was amazed to learn that her friends—fellow refugees who had already reached England before the war started—went to great lengths to try to get her out of Paris, and finally came up with a ruse: a tenuous connection with the Secret Service of the defeated Spanish Republican government, combined with shrewd manipulation of British guilt over the betrayal of Czechoslovakia at Munich. My mother laughed as she told me they persuaded the Foreign Office that she was a Czech secret agent in need of a special entry permit. And an airplane ticket. "The first time I ever flew," she said with a chuckle.

I had a lot of questions about the espionage connection, but I never asked more about the flight itself. Years later, after her death, when I was working on a novel based on her experiences as a refugee, I wanted to know what kind of aircraft might have brought her to England. Googling this every way I could think of, I came to a dead end. Everywhere, I read that all civilian air travel between France and England was suspended at the outbreak of war in September 1939, and did not resume until after the liberation of France in 1944.

How could this be? My mother told me she arrived in England in March 1940. She could not have been mistaken about the date. Nor her method of travel.

I dug around some more on-line, but always found the same definitive statement: all passenger air travel was halted.

And then I discovered the British Airways Museum at Heathrow airport. I hit on the "Contact Us" link and sent an email inquiring about civilian flights in March 1940. I received a prompt response, which I opened in eager anticipation. But it was just a friendly invitation to come and visit. The museum was open Tuesday through Thursday 10a.m. to 2p.m. I was due for another visit back home, and my usual flight from San Francisco arrives at 11a.m. I made sure to book mid-week.

This was back in 2008 or 2009. The museum closed soon after that, and I see on-line now that it has since reopened in spanking new digs, with gleaming counters and a polished hardwood floor. Nothing like the place I visited: cramped and shabby, located in a non-descript single-story redbrick building at the outer reaches of the airport compound, off a huge roundabout, identified as a museum by only a small plaque on the wall. I had trouble finding it, not made any easier by my jet-lagged state. But once I maneuvered my wheelie-bag around the boxes crowded at the entrance, and followed the voice of the curator who was welcoming me from the dark inner recesses of the archives, I discovered a hidden gem.

Mr. Davis was bent over a box on the counter, and immediately began showing me the treasures it contained, assuming I would share his enthusiasm. I struggled to fight off fatigue from my night in Economy Class as he presented ancient technical manuals, crinkled yellow schedules reeking of mildew, and engraved cuff links, all recently donated by a pilot's widow. My attention wandered to the mannequins in 1950's airline uniforms and the glass cases behind him, displaying models of old airplanes.

"Forgive me," he said, his kind eyes sparkling under bushy eyebrows. "Were you looking for something in particular?"

I explained my interest in flights between Paris and London in March 1940, and the impasse I had reached with my on-line research. He frowned, looking puzzled; he said he also would have thought that all passenger service was suspended.

For a moment I feared he did not believe me. But he led me over to another section farther back, under large fluorescent lights, one wall filled with a mammoth bookcase extending twelve feet towards the ceiling. "Let me think," he said rubbing his chin, and inviting me to sit on a chair squeezed between storage boxes.

And then he was off, a man on a mission. He rummaged through filing cabinets, flipped through books, examined leather-bound ledgers, and at one point scrambled up a ladder to reach a volume on a top shelf. It didn't take him long to solve the mystery. Winston Bray's "History of the BOAC" provided the key. The British Overseas Airways Corporation, formed by the merger of Imperial Airways and the original British Airways, did indeed initially suspend service to France in September 1939, but when nothing much happened on the Western Front in the early months of the war, flights resumed in October, albeit on a reduced schedule. These continued until the German advance on France in June 1940.

So I had my answer.

But Mr. Davis wasn't done. Further ferreting through papers produced the timetable for the Paris-London route: the Imperial Airways and British Airways Joint Service between Le Bourget and Croydon. The flight took an hour and a half. I asked what kind of aircraft it would have been.

"Either the Frobisher or the Ensign," he said without looking up, pointing to a display case behind me while he continued his search. "No, wait.' He had found another reference book. "It says here that when the service resumed in October 1939, it was with the Ensign."

I studied the model of the Armstrong Whitworth AW27 Ensign and a list of its specifications and statistics, and black and white photographs. The cabin windows were framed with cloth curtains suspended from dainty brass rods. Elegantly dressed passengers sipped champagne from fluted glasses. The women wore pearls and elaborate hats.

I remembered my father telling me about one occasion in the 1930's, when as a young man, he had flown to the Continent. He came from a privileged upper-middle class background, and I am sure he would have been appropriately attired, in a tweed sports jacket, I imagine. But he told me with amusement about the scene in the departure lounge as he waited to cross the tarmac to board. The other passengers were expensively dressed, and clearly all knew each other. He was approached by a man who tipped his hat and exclaimed in mild surprise "I don't believe we've met!" Imagine my mother on her flight from Paris. How much more bizarre it must have been for her, a penniless refugee.

"Ah ha!" A shout from the filing cabinet brought me back to the present. Mr. Davis wasn't done. He was extracting large bound notebooks, ledgers of some sort: passenger manifests, he announced. He had found 1939, and was hunting for 1940.

Passenger manifests? My heart pounded in my chest. And for a moment I really thought we might find my mother's name on a passenger list. But, no. We examined hand-written entries in neat cursive script listing the dozen or so passengers for each flight: the planes were small. But there was nothing after September 1939.

Mr. Davis seemed to share my sense of deflation. He offered me a cup of tea. What better way to cope? So we sat and chatted about the aviation clubs who visit his museum, and the occasional researchers with quirky requests like mine. He kindly photocopied for me the timetable, the page from Bray's book about the resumption of flights, and photos of the plane, interior and exterior. I was preparing to take my leave, when he jumped up again, and delved into another drawer.

"The Annual Reports of Imperial Airways," he said, extracting another bound volume. "I can't believe we forgot about these." I smiled at the suggestion that I shared some responsibility for this omission. "They recorded passenger numbers each year, of course."

Of course.

"Here's 1940."

And there we found it. No names, but on Saturday March 9 1940, an Imperial Airways Ensign AW27 left Paris Le Bourget at 10:30 a.m. bound for London with ten passengers on board. A chill ran through me. My mother was on that flight. The flight that saved her life.