

"A compulsive page-turner."
—Michael Palin, *The New York Times Book Review*

M R . S T R A N G E L O V E

A Biography of

P E T E R S E L L E R S

E D S I K O V

MR. STRANGELOVE

A Biography of
PETER SELLERS

ED SIKOV



*To Edward Hibbert,
who makes my work possible.*

*To Bruce Schackman,
who makes the rest possible.*

Some forms of reality are so horrible we refuse to face them, unless we are trapped into it by comedy.

To label any subject unsuitable for comedy is to admit defeat.

—Peter Sellers

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ALSO BY ED SIKOV

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PART ONE

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

1925-57

ONE

“Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”

In 1924, a low-end music hall performer called Peg Sellers gave birth to a baby boy. She named him Peter. Peg had long been dominated by her imposing impresario of a mother, Welcome Mendoza, and she was eager to focus her own fierce maternal drive on the tiny boy. But Peter Sellers died quickly and was buried and never mentioned again.

Welcome Mendoza was, truly, the outlandish name with which Peg Sellers’s mother was born, though she changed it twice along the way: first to Marks when she got married, then to Ray when she elbowed her kids onto the music hall stage. Showmanship and aggression ran strong in this family. Welcome Mendoza Marks, who started calling herself Belle Ray when she became a vaudeville manager, was the granddaughter of the most renowned Jewish prizefighter of the eighteenth century.

Strange to say, there were many brawling Jews in that era: Aby Belasco, Barney “Star of the East” Aaron, Lazarus the Jew Boy, the curiously named Ikey Pig.... But the best of them, the strongest and scrappiest, was Daniel Mendoza, whose fabulous life in the ring was set up, however indirectly, by a gang of Jewish killers. In the spring of 1771, a flourishing group of circumcised thieves (led by a doctor, of all people) was busily breaking into Chelsea houses and successfully removing items of interest. The crime spree came to an abrupt end in June when, in the midst of a heist, they made the mistake of killing somebody’s servant. The doctor and his gang were quickly apprehended, tried, convicted, and hanged, but the rest of London’s Jewish population felt a more long-lasting effect. “I have seen many Jews hooted, hunted, cuffed, pulled by the beard, spit upon, and barbarously assaulted in the streets,” a contemporary wrote. “Dogs could not be used in the streets in the manner many Jews were treated.”

Daniel Mendoza was five years old at the time of the Chelsea murder, the consequence being that throughout his childhood and adolescence no Jewish boy in London was safe from Christian harassment. Daniel was naturally tough, even belligerent, and he learned to protect himself. When he got older he trained other boys to fight as well, and eventually, as Mendoza’s contemporary noted, “it was no longer safe to insult a Jew unless he was an old man and alone.” Thrashing others was not Daniel’s first career choice, however. After his bar mitzvah he set himself on course to becoming a glassmaker, but his apprenticeship came to a quick end when he couldn’t help but beat up the glazier’s son. He moved on to assist a greengrocer but spent so much time physically avenging the grocer’s wife against the insults of shoppers that he soon moved on again, this time to a tea shop, where he

responded to a customer's complaint about the service by clobbering him—for forty-five minutes. The bruised patron, however, had sense. He responded not with legal action but with sound advice: He convinced Daniel to become a professional fighter.

Until his great-great-grandson surpassed him in both fame and fortune, Daniel Mendoza was his family's brightest star. (The great-great-grandson acknowledged this fact in several of his films by hanging portraits of Mendoza in the background; a certain inept French detective, for instance, is an admirer of Daniel Mendoza.) The prizefighter left a curious series of personality bequests. Like his descendent, Mendoza liked to assume other identities if his own grew dull. Mendoza and his friends once decided to go out on the town in the guise of seamen and were promptly arrested, having been mistaken for group of sailors who had just jumped ship. Like his descendent, Mendoza didn't quit show business after facing a hostile audience. There's the story of Mendoza showing up at a Purim pageant and being hired on the spot to perform; the audience booed, the manager refused to pay, and Mendoza, never one to back down from a dispute, simply persisted in his demands until he got his fee. And he was inevitably the victim of trouble, never the cause. As described by a contemporary, he "always was the injured party. In his own estimation, never was there such a mild mannered man as he. The fights just seemed to seek him out." Can a sense of victimization be genetic?

Mendoza made and lost a vast amount of money in his life. His abiding concern for the box office led him to stage one of several grudge matches with his archrival, Richard Humphreys, on the riverbank, specifically to keep gatecrashers away. He never imagined that they would simply arrive by boat, a fact that bugged him for the rest of his life. The Prince of Wales introduced his friend Mendoza to his father; thus Daniel Mendoza rode the royal carriage to Windsor Castle and met George III. They strolled on the terrace together, the King of England and the street fighter from the East End. It was the first time the monarch had ever spoken to a Jew. After winning his first professional bout and earning the sum of five guineas, he went on in 1785 to whip a fighter called Martin the Butcher in a record twenty minutes and earned, thanks to the patronage and friendship of the Prince of Wales, more than £1,000—a fantastic sum at the time.

Mendoza tended to spend more than he earned, a common enough failing, and more than once he spent time in debtors' prison. As he aged, prizefighting had to be supplemented with catering. Process serving. Recruiting soldiers. Innkeeping. Inciting a mob. Baking. Mendoza died in 1836 at the age of seventy-three, leaving a wife, eleven children, and no money.

Daniel's son Isaac married a woman named Lesser, who bore Welcome. Welcome married Solomon Marks and bore Peg. Peg married Bill Sellers. In 1925 Peg and Bill had another baby to replace the dead one. They called him Peter, too.

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Welcome Mendoza Marks was prolific and shrewd, not only as a businesswoman but as a mother. She birthed, fed, and raised a total of eight sons—George, Harry, Chick, Alfred, Lewis, Dick, Moss, and Bert—and two daughters, Cissie and Peg, whose real name was Agnes. When Solomon Marks died, Welcome was dynamic enough to corral her ten offspring at a house at Cassland Crescent, Hackney, and press upon them the idea of a family theater troupe and management company. She called it Ray Brothers, Ltd., having decided that Belle Ray was a more fitting name for a woman of the theater, though everybody around her called her “Ma.”

Ma Ray was Mama Rose with skill, better luck, and more children. She never aimed at art. Commerce was her goal, and the more the better. From nothing, she came to manage forty other vaudeville companies in addition to her own, though Ray Brothers, Ltd., was always her chief concern. The company survived, even thrived, but the hard fact was, vaudeville was already on its way out. As clever as Ma was as a theater manager, a more prescient enterprise would have been the business of motion picture exhibition. And even within the slowly declining world of the English music hall, Ray Brothers were never top-notch. They don’t seem to have ever played London—only provincial theaters, a heavy component of which were summer seaside resorts.

A German inventor sold Ma her big inspiration: a large but transportable water tank. In it, barely clad nymphs (her daughters) would frolic for the pleasure of an audience (mostly men) who hadn’t come to see Shakespeare. Ma called her first revue “Splash Me!” It was prurient, and it sold well. The only problem, her grandson later claimed, was that the tank broke one evening and “eventually drowned the band.... Seriously drowned!” (Asked by the interviewer how someone could be “unseriously drowned,” the grandson was vague: “Yes, anyway ...”)

Neither Peg nor Cissie Marks was a beauty, but they were young and in good enough shape, and they could always be supplemented by any interchangeable showgirl willing to appear nearly naked and drench herself for pay on a music hall stage. Historically, aquacades have not ranked high in the aesthetic hierarchy of live performance, but even in its own category “Splash Me!” challenged good taste, particularly when Ma directed the girls to eat bananas underwater. With “Splash Me!,” audiences throughout southern England knew precisely what they had come to see. So did local officials. But Ma got around whatever Watch Committee happened to have jurisdiction by tinting the water lighter or darker depending on the degree of likely censorship in that particular venue. Always cagey, she took a preemptively patriotic posture during World War I by dyeing the tank water red or white or blue and daring the prudes to criticize such a public-spirited celebration.

Water was not Ma Ray’s only medium. For many years she got her daughter

Peg to stand onstage in a flesh-toned leotard. This seems to have been the essential point of the act, though its artistic justification took the form of Peg's brother Bert projecting slides on her body that miraculously dressed her as any number of famous ladies—Queen Victoria, Elizabeth I, the Statue of Liberty. Peg appeared in other forms as well. One in particular, a chestnut skit starring Peg as a libidinous charwoman, served well as the warm-up for the water tank.

They were theater people, the Marks/Rays, and Ma was not overly concerned with her children's sex lives, though she's said to have set a strict moral tone during work hours. Peg attempted marriage with a fellow named Ayers, but it didn't work, and soon she was single again and back with Ma. In 1921, with Peg a divorcee pushing twenty-five, Ma felt the need to go husband hunting on her daughter's behalf. An added incentive for the matriarch was that her car, an enormous showy red thing, needed a driver. And so she found Bill Sellers.

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They were playing Portsmouth. Her new production (either "More Splashes" or "Have a Dip!," there's some dispute) had just opened at the King's Theatre. It was the Roaring Twenties in England, which is to say that the tank water was clear and the censors weren't troubled. Peg and Ma were seated in a café listening to the piano player's rendition of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," and Ma liked what she heard. She asked the man if he could drive a car and promptly hired him.

Bill Sellers—actually "Seller" at the time—was a Yorkshireman (Bingley, to be precise), a fact that couldn't have worried Ma Ray, and he was a Protestant, which might have bothered her but didn't. Bill did not possess a powerful personality. And it may have evaporated further after he married Peg. The writer and comedian Spike Milligan, who met him in the 1940s, once described him: "Bill, I think, is kept in the clothes cupboard. I see his cigarette smoke filtering through the keyhole. Poor Bill—the original man who never was; he looked a pasty white and reminded me of those people at Belsen."

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Peg and Bill married in London at the Bloomsbury Registry Office in 1923. The marriage certificate lists the bride as "Agnes Doreen Ayers, formerly Marks;" the groom's name is down as "Seller." The ceremony was brief and the reception nonexistent, since Ma spirited Peg off immediately afterward to perform the charlady routine while Bill rushed off in another direction to play the piano for another act. They moved—Peg and Bill and Ma—into a rooming house in Highgate, North London.

Peg's first pregnancy began soon thereafter. She kept performing. They

were on tour in Dublin when the baby was born and died. According to Bert Marks's wife, Vera, "We were told that we were never, never to refer to that child. It was as if he had never existed." But by remaining entirely unspoken, of course, baby Peter's death came to dominate the family's emotional life for years to come.

Peg's second pregnancy began at the end of 1924, and once again it did not stand in the way of her performing schedule. Neither did labor. She was onstage in the middle of a routine in Southsea on the evening of September 8, 1925, when contractions began, and, trouper that she was, since she had no understudy she went right on with the show. After the curtain fell Bill hauled her into the big red heap of a Ford, got her back to their lodgings, and summoned an obstetrician. And so Richard Henry Seller, the second boy they called Peter, was born. One week later Peg was back onstage.

Peter Sellers, a showbiz baby, was carried onstage two weeks into his life by the vaudevillian Dickie Henderson, who encouraged the audience to join him in singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Little Pete instantly burst into tears and the audience erupted into laughter and applause. From Pete's perspective, this emotional scenario was played out more or less consistently until his death in 1980.

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"Fun Showers." "Mermaids." "Ripples." Hampshire. Kent. Suffolk. Trunks, rooming houses, Ma, and the inevitable water tank... Baby Pete was schlepped around with Ray Brothers, Ltd., and never had a home. He was pressed into theatrical service at the age of two and a half when Peg secured the little blond boy into a cute white-tie-and-tails outfit complete with a top hat, thrust a cane into his tiny hands, and forced him onstage to sing the sappy "My Old Dutch." The boy detested the bit and made his criticism physical by stomping on the hat.

Matriculation at Miss Whitney's Dancing Academy in Southsea was equally short-lived (discipline problems). But when the child cared to perform his own routines on his own schedule and terms, he was a natural. And he liked it. His Aunt Vera, whom he called Auntie Ve, used to accompany him to the waterfront at Southsea so he could play at conducting an orchestra for amused passersby. She also took him to see *Peter Pan* in London, where, inspired by the onstage Peter's ability to fly, one daring little boy in the balcony attempted to hurl himself off the ledge. Auntie Ve restrained him.

Peg and Bill saw their son as their best ticket to theatrical easy street, a role the son resented. As Auntie Ve once recalled, "They all thought, 'This is where we sit back and Peter will make us a fortune.'" Defiant at an early age, though, young Pete refused to cooperate. Hired for £5 to pose for an advertisement, he shunned all the photographer's directions and then flatly refused to take on any more modeling assignments.

“He was a little monster.” This was Auntie Ve on the subject of her nephew. “He had far too many people worshipping him. A good smacking would have done him the world of good.” Her husband, Uncle Bert, agreed: “If Peg had to go out of the room for a minute, he would set up a yell you could hear in the Portsmouth dockyards on payday.”

Discipline played no role in Peter Sellers’s upbringing. Once, after he pushed one of his aunties into the fireplace—with a fire in it—Peg’s response was simply to say that “it’s the kind of mischief any boy would get into at his age.” After all, she was his mother.

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Still, it was a peculiar kind of worship, since Peg alternately doted on and abandoned the boy according to her own needs. She gave him whatever he wanted when she was there, but then she went off on tour and left him in the care of one of the aunts. Peg and Bill did bring Pete along with them sometimes, but their care of him was still sporadic, not to mention risk-prone. In the midst of a fierce Yorkshire winter, with Peg and Bill appearing in something called *The Sideshow* and the child being carted back and forth between a chilly rooming house and the spartan dressing rooms of the Keighley Hippodrome, Pete developed bronchial pneumonia.

The stink of stale fish in strange hotels was the price Peter Sellers paid for staying with his parents when they were working. It was a sad childhood, and he hated it. “I really didn’t like that period of my life as a kid,” he once declared. “I didn’t like the touring. I didn’t like the smell of grease paint. It used to hit you when you went into any stage door. Grease paint and baritones with beer on their breath and makeup on their collar.... All these voices: ‘Hello, how are you, little sonny boy? Are you all right little boy there? (Who is he?)’ I used to spend my time sitting in dressing rooms.”

There were, of course, moments when Peter found joy in the work of entertainers. One act in particular contributed greatly to young Peter’s appreciation of the absurd. He loved Fred Roper’s Midgets. They played with trained dogs and jumped through hoops and were the same size as Pete, despite the fact that they had deep voices and smoked cigars. The midget act’s merry idiocy spoke to him.

Tragedy provided Pete’s salvation from the stinking backstages. Ma Ray died in 1932, and the company quickly slid. Bill and Peg and the uncles were forced to take work with other troupes, and Pete got to stay home a bit more with one or the other of his parents.

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Peter Sellers had just turned six years old in September 1931, when Britain went off the gold standard; by 1932, his cast-adrift parents had discovered a new way of making money. They called it “golding.” It was, in essence, a

scam. Bill, Peg, and Peg's brother Bert would climb into Bert's car with little Pete in tow; they'd drive out of London to some remote village or other and go house to house convincing the naïve locals that they represented the London Gold Refiners Company, Ltd., a flimflam firm that paid equally fictitious prices for gold. The locals had no idea what their jewelry was worth; Peg did, and she profited. The only "refined" aspect of the company was the phony accents Pete's mother assumed as she relieved people of their bracelets and chains. Although Pete was kept out of sight in the car during these glorified shakedowns, he still claimed as an adult to remember hearing his mother's performances in the gold trade. Even at the time the boy considered them to be a step up from what he had heard her do onstage.

Bill, meanwhile, formed a ukulele duo with a man named Lewis, which meant that he was often on the road. With the already spectral Bill vanishing completely when he went out on tour, Pete was left entirely in his mother's care. The Sellers family's life was made even more transitory by the fact that they kept changing apartments; moving was easier than paying the rent. "I had the constant feeling I was a mole on the lam," Sellers recalled. "I kept longing for another more glamorous existence—for a different me, you might say. Maybe that was the beginning of my capacity for really becoming somebody else."

Still, the Sellerses cut a particular swath as they chased around London: They kept entirely to the north side of the city. The family's locus classicus, established by Ma Ray, was Hackney. Ma lived with Peg and Bill in Islington, East Finchley, and Highgate; after she died the Sellerses moved around in Camden Town. Apart from brute geography, what linked these neighborhoods was their increasing Jewishness. Whitechapel, the East London neighborhood in which Daniel Mendoza lived, was still the center of Jewish life in the city (to the point of being considered a ghetto as late as 1900), but the North London neighborhoods in which the Sellerses housed themselves were attracting more Jews by the year.

All the stranger, then, that it was to St. Mark's Kindergarten that Peg Sellers sent her son. When Pete outgrew St. Mark's, she packed him off to St. Aloysius, a prep school run by the Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy. It wasn't simple convenience that drove Peg to pick St. Aloysius, and in fact she moved to a small house in Muswell Hill Road, Highgate, specifically to give Peter close access to that particular Catholic school. A telling aspect about all of these shifts in residence is that family and friends—and Peter himself—consistently attributed the decision-making to Peg: Peg choosing the school, Peg moving with Peter, Peg, Peg, Peg. Even when Bill was there he wasn't there. Indeed, according to Peter's son, Michael, while Peg and Peter lived at Muswell Hill, Bill lived separately at Holloway.

On still another occasion, Bill disappeared entirely, and Pete had no idea what had precipitated the departure. After a good deal of time had passed, Peg put Pete in a car, drove to Leicester Square, found Bill standing on the

sidewalk as obviously promised, and took him back, leaving Pete utterly baffled.

Pete was not a stupid boy, but he was very much an uneducated one, Peg never having stressed learning as a virtue. Originally enrolled in Form II at St. Aloysius, he was quickly sent back to Form I, an experience he found humiliating. One of his teachers, Brother Hugh, remembered that Pete was upset at his demotion, especially because he was not only older but substantially larger than any of the other boys in his new class. At that point he was almost five feet tall and fairly fat, with coarsening features, dark hair, and all the natural grace and poise of an expanding eleven-year-old. Brother Cornelius recalled that Pete looked as though he was four or five years older than he actually was, a fact that, combined with his educational underachievement, exacerbated his embarrassment.

The most striking feature of Peter Sellers's schooldays is the fact that practically nobody remembered him. As Brother Cornelius said, "One always remembers the troublemakers. But Peter, we didn't notice him at all." Scouring the many profiles, interviews, memoirs, surveys, studies, and incidental trivia about the life of Peter Sellers—and in England there are libraries' worth—one finds reference to only one schoolmate who has ever had anything to say. And what he says is rather weird.

Bryan Connon, turned up by the deft entertainment writer Alexander Walker, appears to have been Pete's only chum at school. "He wasn't much liked," Connon told Walker. But that wasn't a big problem, Connon continued, because "he seemed to have no need of friends. The retreat home to Peg was always open to him—it was the one he preferred to take." Peg's son *had* to go to school, and so he *might* make a friend there, but Pete's friendship with Bryan Connon stopped precisely at her front gate. He never got as far as her doorstep.

Sellers himself reflected on the loneliness of his childhood: "Sometimes I felt glad not to be too close to people. I might have been happier, I suppose. On the other hand, I never had much luck with people over the years."

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Pete was not the only non-Catholic at St. Aloysius, though he was probably the only Jew, and the brothers maintained a liberal policy of accommodation: non-Catholic boys were excused from prayers at their parents' request. The strange thing is that Peg never requested it. And so Peter Sellers learned his catechism. In fact, he mastered not only its language but its cadence and pitch, all in perfect imitation of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy chanting in chapel. This skill prompted Brother Cornelius to scold Pete's recalcitrant classmates: "The Jewish boy knows his catechism better than the rest of you!" The problem was, of course, that it wasn't his catechism.

One of the few constants, apart from his mother, was the BBC.

The loyal electromagnetic friend of lonely boys, the radio carried more than simple entertainment into the restricted world within which Peg had barricaded her son. There was nothing radical on the BBC's airwaves, but the middlebrow comedians and variety acts that formed, along with news and sports, the backbone of British broadcasting showed Peter Sellers a way out of his mother's tight domestic trap. However little he understood it at the time (or ever), the blandly funny *Misters Muddlecombe, Murgatroyd, and Winterbottom*, the stately bands, the hours of forgettable patter—all were a subtly defiant rejection of Peg and her otherwise incessant grip.

He particularly loved the variety show *Monday Night at Seven*. (The title and time were later changed to *Monday Night at Eight*.) Pete listened to it every week, as did Bryan Connon, though always in separate houses. On Tuesdays they'd discuss it in exacting detail on their walk home from school, with Peter tossing off all the best comedy bits against Bryan's straight-man backboard. "He had a gift for improvising dialogue," Connon remembers. "I'd be the 'straight' man, the 'feed,' and all the way up Archway Road I'd cue Peter and he'd do all the radio personalities and chuck in a few voices of his own invention as well." The fun would last only as long as the walk, though, for once they reached Peg's gate it was all over. Pete said good-bye and that was the end of that.

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With its heavy quotient of solitude and an awkwardness both physical and social, Peter Sellers's youth might necessarily have carried along a third component: sexual immaturity. But no. Describing his adolescence to Alexander Walker, Sellers described his own youthful randiness: "I found out how much I liked girls and how much they liked me—or said they did."

It started early. Not coincidentally, his entrance into school marked the first opportunity Pete had to spend a few hours away from Peg—and with girls his own age. It was in kindergarten that he fell for a child he nicknamed Sky Blue. She rejected him, but instead of the expected retreat into despair, Pete pressed forward. In fact, Pete kept after Sky Blue all the way into his twenties. It was all to no avail, and yet he persisted on this doomed quest for at least fifteen years, through several changes of school and neighborhood.

Pete's passion for Sky Blue led him to a dawning awareness of how belittling his mother's treatment of him was. Specifically, Peg was still dressing him in shorts, and he hated them. Not wishing to be regarded as a toddler by Sky Blue, he begged his mother for a pair of boy-worthy trousers to wear to Sky Blue's for tea, and since Peg couldn't bear to say no, she gave them to him. This is the kind of family contradiction that ties boys and girls in knots: Peter Sellers's mother protected, controlled, and belittled him, and she refused him nothing—except normal maturation.

As for the outfit Peg chose for Pete's date, it took the ridiculous form of white ducks—formal, starchy things that humiliatingly made him resemble a

tiny aristocrat or waiter. Pete wore the ducks to tea and quickly pissed them in a nervous attack. Since white ducks tend to be rather less impressive with a fresh yellow stain spreading around the crotch, the date was a fiasco.

Even this severe disgrace failed to dampen Peter Sellers's affections, which in itself indicates an unusual psyche for a boy. A less single-minded kid might have given up and moved on, his love turned self-protectively to hate. But Pete was either impervious to punishment or, more likely, a glutton for it, and pressed forward. This time he used performance as his chief means of seduction. In this way Sky Blue became Peter Sellers's first audience—apart, of course, from his devoted mother.

"I found that Sky Blue had a movie hero, Errol Flynn," he recalled. "I'd seen him in *Dawn Patrol* and that was good enough. The next day I put on his voice, his accent, his mannerisms. I even threw in a background of airplane and machine-gun noises for good measure. All to impress Sky Blue." But the girl was a tough audience; the performance wasn't a hit. "She'd switched her affections. Now she was a fan of Robert Donat's. So I went to any Donat films I could find playing—fortunately for me he was a prolific actor—and went through the whole act again with his voice. No luck this time, either."

Rainer Werner Fassbinder once remarked that Steven Spielberg always wanted to be a little boy when he grew up. With Peter Sellers, it was neither a matter of choice nor desire. Consider his formative years: Peg's incessant doting and catering to his every whim; his parents' nomadic existence throughout his childhood; the school shuffle and subsequent demotion at St. Aloysius, which effectively made it impossible to bond with anyone his own age and size; the lack of any religious identity (or, better, the abundance of religions at his disposal); the absent father, both figuratively and literally; the obsessive pursuit of a girl who didn't want him. With whatever degree of intent, Peg and Bill Sellers did a splendid job of creating an emotionally spoiled, spiritually amoebic mama's boy, whose innate and fierce talent for mimicry allowed him not only to perpetuate but to depend on and enjoy his own evacuated personality.

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While the dreariness of Peter Sellers's childhood paved the way only to the awkward joylessness of being the big fat Jew of St. Aloysius, the gray chill of his prep school years yielded, thanks to international politics in the late 1930s, to a dawning awareness of his own potential annihilation. He had just turned thirteen when thoughts of mass suffocation drifted into his head as well as everyone else's in the kingdom. World War II was beginning.

In the last week of September 1938, with Hitler on the brink of attacking Czechoslovakia and the skies of London increasingly dotted with blimps, the government bestowed 38 million gas masks on the British people. Men, women, and children got them; babies, too young to know the difference, were written off.

The historian Angus Calder describes the British people's mood as they tried on their new headgear at the dawn of the new era: "Fitting on these grotesque combinations of pig-snout and death's-head, sniffing the gas-like odour of rubber and disinfectant inside them, millions imagined the dangers ahead more clearly. Symptoms of panic appeared." The imaginative Briton, Calder writes, "saw in his mind's eye not the noble if heart-rending scenes of 1915, not the flower of the nation marching away to fight in a foreign land, but his own living-room smashed, his mother crushed, his children maimed, corpses in familiar streets, a sky black with bombers, the air itself poisoned with gas."

Pete's fourteenth birthday occurred at the end of the week in which Great Britain declared war on Germany. Along with millions of other Englishmen, the Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy ran for cover to the countryside as St. Aloysius was evacuated to a town in Cambridgeshire. Peg, who had opened a Highgate trinket shop at the time, claimed to be unable to move to Cambridgeshire on such short notice.

Perhaps it ought to go without saying, but Peg was unwilling to send her son so far away (two and a half hours by train) without her. So she immediately yanked him out of school, and that was the end of Peter Sellers's education.

She was assisted, however unintentionally, by the government. September 1, 1939, had been set as the date on which children would be required to remain in school to the age of fifteen rather than fourteen, but the war necessitated a postponement. Had it not been for World War II, Peter Sellers might have received at least one more year's worth of education.

But no matter. Peg was very pleased to have him by her side all day long, and that was what counted.

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In September 1939, when the Nazis attacked Poland and England declared war on Germany, the government issued gas masks, mobilized troops, and evacuated nearly 4 million British citizens out of the cities and into the countryside. On the BBC, the immensely popular radio comedian Tommy Handley turned the onrushing catastrophe into an absurd extended joke. Handley's new show, *It's That Man Again*, featured a series of recurring characters with funny voices, a taste for puns, and a brand of humor that would have fallen flat to any audience but the English. In one routine, Handley played the Minister of Aggravation, a joint venture between Agriculture and Information:

HANDLEY: To all concerned in the Office of Twerps! Take notice that from today, September the twenty-tooth, I, the Minister of Aggravation, have power to confiscate, complicate, and commandeer—

ASSISTANT: How do you spell *commandeer*, Mr. Hanwell?

HANDLEY: Commandeer—let me see. (Singing:) Comm-on-and-ear, comm-on-and-ear, Tommy Handley’s wag-time band! Comm-on-and-ear ...!
Er, where were we? “I have the power to seize anything on sight!”

ASSISTANT: Oh, Mr. Handpump! And me sitting so close to you!

Fun, filth, and playing to the crowd: Pete was inspired.

England was profoundly rattled by the war, but by and large the British people didn’t go berserk at the prospect, their mood at the start of this international catastrophe an improvement over the previous generation’s histrionic reaction to the so-called Great War. (The declaration of war on Germany in August 1914 is said to have sparked the stoning of hapless dachshunds in the streets.) In fact, because there was so little combat at first, British wags took to calling it “the Bore War.”

Pete helped his mum in her shop. His only friend, Bryan Connon from St. Aloysius, was now his former only friend, having been dispatched along with the other schoolboys to Cambridgeshire. Connon never heard from Sellers again. With no contact with boys his own age, nor any men except his always-in-the-background father—even the celibate monks of St. Aloysius were more spirited role models—Pete’s social world now consisted essentially of his mother and the BBC. Together in their North London flat, Pete with his radio and Peg with her trinkets, they endured the coldest winter London had weathered in forty-five years.

And the blackouts. Once a night, for a few minutes at least, everyone in London had to tack thick curtains or dark paper over their windows or face the chastisement of police or patrolling air raid wardens. Blackouts were a matter of national security, of course; lights provided targets for Nazi bombers. But in the Sellers household, blackout curtains served as the physical manifestation of Peg’s goal as a mother—they sealed her son away with her. The outside world could never love him as much as she did, so he had to be kept from it in isolation.

As particular as Pete’s situation was, however, his countrymen were also experiencing a deep and sometimes morbidly comical sense of disconnection. Plunged into blackness every night, not only were the British people forced to sequester themselves behind dark curtains at home, but the enforced murk of London streets at night led to pratfalls. All told, an astounding one in five people injured themselves during the blackouts—walking headlong into trees and lampposts, bumping against fat people, even just losing their way in the dark chaos of an otherwise familiar lane and tumbling off the curb. Nightlife had suddenly turned into a series of goofily scary and nonsensical comedy routines.

The Bore War, or “funny war” as it was also known, grew less boring in May 1940 when the Nazis’ seemingly unstoppable march to the French coast forced the humiliating evacuation of 220,000 British soldiers from the beaches near Dunkirk. The boredom ended absolutely on Saturday, September

7—the day before Pete’s fifteenth birthday—when German war planes destroyed London’s East End. Other London neighborhoods saw the day’s cataclysm as predictive of their own fates. The blitz lasted a full two-and-a-half months, and German ships began massing off the coast of France. The possibility of an outright invasion of England became a much less abstract notion.

When the bombing began, Peg and Pete ran, along with countless other terrified Londoners, to the nearest underground station, which in their case happened to be Highgate. A few weeks later, the Sellers’s flat suffered a bit of damage during a bombing raid. The apartment was certainly inhabitable and the shop could have survived, but it was a close enough call to convince Peg to shut the business, pack the trinkets and all the family’s furniture, and spirit Pete swiftly and safely away from London.

As their refuge, she chose the town of Ilfracombe on the north coast of Devon. Even apart from the fact that a brother worked in a theater there, escaping to Ilfracombe was a smart move on Peg’s part. There was nothing there worth bombing—unless, of course, the Nazis decided to target picturesque seaside resorts for obliteration by firestorm.